

P A T C A D I G A N

Dirty Work



Dirty Work

S T O R I E S B Y
P A T C A D I G A N

Dirty Work? In a manner of speaking, perhaps, but certainly not along the lines of de Sade or Henry Miller.

"Dirty" maybe because within this remarkable volume of short stories (a follow-up to her award-winning collection *Patterns*) author **Pat Cadigan** unflinchingly explores the implications of technology on modern and near-future societies, humorously challenges our perceptions of reality, and chillingly strips away our civilized facades to confront the bestial nature of our souls.

With stories like "Home By the Sea," "Dispatches From the Revolution," "No Prisoners," "50 Ways To Improve Your Orgasm," and "Naming Names," Pat Cadigan exhibits an enviable ability to tackle a variety of themes, moods, and perspectives. And makes it all seem easy.

Featuring 18 stunning fictions (including the previously unpublished "Lost Girls" written especially for this book)--as well as intriguing author introductions to each story--*Dirty Work* is a thought-provoking, often funny, never compromising collection by one of America's most gifted authors.

It doesn't get any better than this.

D I R T Y
W O R K



*This deluxe slipcased edition of Dirty Work
by Pat Cadigan is limited to
300 signed and numbered copies
of which this is number_____.*

Dirty Work

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S T O R I E S B Y
P A T C A D I G A N



MARK D. ZIESING
SHINGLETOWN, CA
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DIRTY WORK
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For Ellen Datlow
I don't know what I'd do without you and

For Keith Ferrell
You saved the day



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▼

InTROdUctIOn

by
Storm Constantine

This book that you have picked up and (presumably) bought contains stories that are speculative fiction. I'd like to get that clear from the start. Although they will be enjoyed by lovers of science fiction, horror and fantasy, the stories are primarily Pat Cadigan speculating about the world she inhabits, and that is the world familiar to all of us, the same world that – occasionally – is unfamiliar to all of us too. Whether our belief system veers towards physics or something more mystical (is it possible to be more mystical than physics nowadays?), most of us, at some time, get a feeling that there just might be another side to reality that exists alongside our own. Perhaps more than simply one other side – perhaps a great tangle of them! In paranoid moments – or moments of solitude in the dark – you might think that maybe the conspiracy-freaks are right, and there really are weird people about, people who are unnervingly different to ourselves, who could be hiding within our society. People with Another Kind of Knowing.

Sometimes we might even get what appears to be glimpses of these people and their other, 'not our' worlds. You know those times. It's when coincidence aligns to alarming effect, invoking incredulity, bafflement and a creepy feeling up the spine. As an experiment, ask everyone you meet if they have ever experienced anything they found inexplicable, strange, reality-challenging. I don't think I've ever met anyone who doesn't have their own weird story to tell. Pat Cadigan, undoubtedly, has a whole catalogue of them. She knows the other worlds of the Not-Quite-Normal quite intimately, I feel. She sees the secret people and accommodates them quite fearlessly within her stories. And yet, this is not to say her work can be placed solely in the realms of the fantastic, for what Pat writes about best, even in her most reality-shaping moments, is Life – our lives. She directs her clear sight into the viscera of estrangement, self-doubt, fear, political lunacy, loneliness and violence. Her hidden worlds and secret people are metaphors for all that is hidden and secret within ourselves. The characters in Pat's stories are real people, never simply plot devices or ciphers; they just happen to be experiencing something quite bizarre for a little while.

*My first experience of Pat's work was her debut novel, *Mindplayers*, which appeared in 1988. I'd already become acquainted with the cyberpunk novelists, and their offspring: *Mindplayers* had been heralded as another relative of this irreverent tribe. Now, while I had admired the neon extremities of cyberpunk, and post-cyberpunk, creations, marveled at the slick-speak employed by the authors, the casual familiarity with mind-blowing technology, as a body of work it had never touched my emotions. Perhaps this was simply a characteristic of the genre. *Mindplayers* was to change my mind about that. After reading only a few pages, I knew I'd come across something different – and maybe, despite its trappings – *Mindplayers* wasn't quite the book I'd been led to believe it was. It wasn't just that the prose itself was a pleasure to read, (the rhythm of a novel is what tends to draw me into the story). Regardless of the sleek techno-trappings, *Mindplayers* transcended its supposed genre. It was about people; frail and vulnerable; tough and street-wise. The idiom Pat wielded was deft, yet there was a constant rhythmic rumble beneath the words that whispered of the cracking sanity of Deadpan Allie, the female protagonist (who makes a guest appearance in this collection). Disorienting mantras pervaded the text. Altered states of consciousness? Alerted snakes of consequence, of course.*

*If *Mindplayers* was an outstanding achievement for a first novel, Pat's second book, *Synners*, had me in awe of her writing. The plot was*

convoluted, yet skimmed along with silvery ease. As in Mindplayers, the novel was permeated with mantras, little loops that stuck in the brain, the murmuring, insistent, almost sinister undercurrent that underlined the neuroses of certain protagonists within the story. Pat insisted to me she was not an aficionado of new technology, yet this was far from apparent in the book. However, the story was never sacrificed to the technology; the characters were (literally in some cases) part of it, yet vital and credible in their own right, with their own developed histories and futures. The sub-culture of the synners (hacker/punk/drug/music) was explored without resorting to cliché. Pat spoke with confidence and vision, almost as if she herself had experienced the wild life of her female lead, Gina. Also, Pat being a mistress of cynical asides, the book had been written with humour, even if it was often bitter sweet.

The stories in this collection cover many themes, but one of their unifying factors is the twist in the tail, the final ironic flick of a sleek paw that, with careless, whimsical cruelty, toys with the reader. It might be you thought the story you'd been reading had finished, but no, she puts a last sentence down, just a few words, just a few slivers of something, well, sharp and glossy. Pat likes to let her readers run about between her claws, allowing them to believe they understand what's happening to them and will be allowed to escape, before she casually delivers the final blow she has been planning all along. Her stories never shrink from embracing every human feeling; sharp humour sits down with tragedy, the unexpected becomes manifest. The humour is often black, because of its devilish accuracy as it impales the human condition.

At first glance, 'New Life for Old' appears to be a light-hearted tale, a fairy story, but after lulling the reader into this false sense of familiarity, the story back-flips into a poignant stab at what it means to grow old, invoking the wistful inevitability of fading youth, the idyllic and best-remembered summer day that is all too short, the snapshot memory. The last line is devastating. I read this one aloud to a friend, starting off in a light-hearted voice, which gradually, involuntarily, changed in tone, to something distinctly more tremulous. At the end of it, hairs were standing up on my arms. My listener said one word: 'Brilliant!' And then, 'Are they all like that?'

Well, not exactly of course, because, every story is different, but every one of them delivers. The stings in the tails vary in toxicity, but never fail to give a jolt, a rush, a feeling of 'Oh Yes!' Through her writing, Pat makes you feel as if you're being given insight into something arcane, and sometimes the complexities of her tale-weaving are like a juggler control-

ling a myriad flight of shiny baubles. The intricacies of the plot, and the almost elusive concepts the author is exploring, are intertwined enough to perturb the brain, like when you attempt to get a grip on the infinity of Universe. I often think that when she's writing Pat must slip into some parallel level, whose rules and subtleties are almost beyond our ability to grasp. Yet in the end, mindful of her charges, the readers, she always leads us back to reality, aligns in our senses and our minds the threads of the story she is telling. 'Oh yes, of course! Altered snakes of consequence, after all!'

The story 'Naming Names' also beguiles us at first into thinking we are in Recognized Territory, through Pat's use of another motif from fairy-tale. Knowing a person's true and secret name allows the Knower to strip the Named of autonomy, to acquire a person's soul. This is a contemporary fantasy story, right, but our feet are firmly on the ground here, aren't they? Don't count on it! Gradually, surreality creeps through the familiar world. The protagonist's trip on the ferry, populated by secret people who move unseen among the passengers, where random snatches of conversation carried on the air apply directly to the protagonist's own life and needs, exemplifies perfectly Pat's silken use of language to convey the subtleties of her stories.

The story 'A Deal with God' – a loose sequel to 'Naming Names' – plays havoc with your senses of reality and time. Here, the language jumps through hoops at Pat's command, allowing her to convey her honeycomb of ideas without slipping or losing balance. It would be so easy to become lost in the plot, yet you emerge, perhaps a little dazed and disoriented, but aware you have experienced something other. Again. And you are breathless back in reality. Until the next time you pick up the book. Which is of course an impulse too strong to resist, even if the text can make you feel a little weird, a little unsure of whether real is real.

I feel strongly that these stories will resonate with their readers in different ways, according to the individual. They will get to you, all of you, (in both senses of the phrase) of that I am quite sure. When you put the book down, you will not come blinking back into daylight unmoved. There are secret messages, secret resonances, for everyone within the pages of this book. The stories work on more than one level, and the trip into their realities will differ for every one of you. The message of this introduction is: 'read these stories now.' Nothing more. In case you hadn't guessed.

Storm Constantine
1993



DIRTY WORK

▼

i n t r o d u c t i o n t o
DIRTY WORK

Ellen Datlow had the idea a few years back to edit an anthology of stories exploring the theme of vampirism. Not traditional vampires, but vampirism. When she told me about it, we both agreed that the pathosfinder Deadpan Allie would be a natural.

*It was an idea that had already crossed my mind, more or less—this was actually the second of the stories about Allie that I set out to write, but after a few pages, I realized it was too soon, and I put them away. When I took them out again, the story was right there waiting for me. It is the only one of the Deadpan Allie stories that was not incorporated into my first novel *Mindplayers*, and to date it remains the last that I have written about her.*

*Like all good ideas, Ellen's anthology took some time and no little effort to put over. To a publisher, that is; the writers were already on the case, as were the readers—*Blood Is Not Enough* was so successful that Ellen edited a companion volume called *A Whisper Of Blood*. Vampirism, like the naked city, is good for a million or two stories. Think about it.*

*As for "Dirty Work"—well, after my previous collection, *Patterns*, was published, Ellen called to tell me that in spite of what I had said in my introductory remarks to one of the stories, it was perfectly all right for me to say she had a mean streak, she didn't mind, really. But considering her response to "Dirty Work," I think news of Ellen Datlow's mean streak is greatly exaggerated...while my own is probably not.*

DIRTY WORK

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GO

So, NN, how's the family? Ah, sorry, I mean the agency. Of course. Yes, of course. I'm sending you this instead of coming back myself. Sorry to cut into your Bolshoi Ballet viewing time like this. I won't be transmitting a vocal. I haven't spoken for, I'm not sure, days. Lots of days. Something's happened to my speech center. I'd have to put a socket in my head to vocalize and there doesn't seem to be a surgeon handy. Anyway, I know how much you hate sockets. Then, too, I don't speak any Romance language. But just about all the merchants sign, so I make my needs known that way. I used to sign a lot back at J. Walter Tech when I was getting my almost worthless education and learning to read Emotional Indexes—Indices?—and I'd forgotten how much I enjoyed it. You know, NN, I like it so much, I'm thinking about just letting my speech center go. I haven't sustained complete damage to language. I can write, and I can read what I've written for as long as my short term memory cares to hold it. It's a capricious thing, short term memory. Where was I? Oh. Ever hear of that kind of damage before? I don't know if I can understand anything said to me because I haven't heard any English or Mandarin since I got here. But then, maybe I wouldn't know if I had. I hear them talking here in their own language and it doesn't sound right, it doesn't sound like language. It sounds like noise. Clang-clang, clang-clang. Being a mute may be unnecessary in this day, but it's hardly a handicap in my profession. People talk too goddamn much.

You wouldn't see it that way. *You* talked me into this job. Big bonus, you said. Buy the apartment I've been scouting, you said. Just a job, where's my professionalism, you said, and you said, and you said. Nothing wrong with

your speech center.

But you know it—you would love me if you could see me now. Because one of the other effects of this half-assed aphasia I've got is my facial muscles are paralyzed. You'd never ask me again if they called me Deadpan Allie for nothing.

That's what you asked me when you talked me into this. I can remember. I've got one eye out and I'm plugged into the memory boost (all the equipment's here, I wouldn't want it to fall into the wrong hands. Like yours). Left eye. I tried the other eye but I don't think my left hemisphere wants to talk to you because I can't type and remember at the same time plugged in on that side. Typing lefthanded, too. I guess I've got enough language on that side of the brain.

I'm meandering. You'll have to bear with me.

I told you when you talked me into this I don't do dirty work. People like me because I'm clean. I was clean with the fetishist, I was clean with the mindsuck composer, I was clean with your son-in-law and he pushed me. But you wanted me to do this one. Do you remember what I said or do you need a boost for it? I told you anyone who insisted on working with an empath didn't need me.

Fine. It's a silly prejudice. Maybe I wouldn't want anyone to get that close to me without the decency of a machine between us. It's my right to feel that way. Why did you send me when you knew I felt that way? Professionalism. I know that. Don't try getting in touch with me to tell me something I already know. Fine. They asked for me. They asked for me. Fine. They asked for me. They asked for me. Fine. They asked for—

Excuse. I got a bounce on that, a real ricochet. I'm not myself today. Or maybe I am, for the first time in a long time.

I'd always thought of the entourage as a thing of the past. Not just entourage, but Entourage, as in the people who tend to accumulate around someone who happens to be Somebody. Now, I've seen performance artists who keep an audience on retainer so they can hone work as they go but an Entourage is a lot more than that, and a lot less, too. Caverty had a whole houseful of Entourage—highly unusual for a holo artist, I thought—and there was a hell of a lot of house. I'd already been told how it was with him—hell, I knew about the empath, didn't I?—but that didn't mean I could anticipate the experience of opening the front door and finding them all there.

Yes, I did open the front door myself. Noisy crowd, they didn't hear me ring so I tried the controls and the door swung open to the entry hall. All those done-over mansions in the slightly-upper Midwest retained the entry halls, complete with chandelier. Yesterday's gentility, today's bright idea. This

one was tiled in a black and white compass pattern. When you came in, you could see you were standing just slightly east of true north, if that sort of thing mattered to you. The Compass hasn't permeated everything the way the Zodiac has, but then it's a pretty new idea. Personally, I think *What's your direction?* will always be as dumb a question as *What's your sign?* None of the half-dozen people standing around in the entry hall asked me either question, or anything else, including *Need some help?* as I unloaded my baggage from the flyer. The pilot watched from the front seat; she was union and definitely not a baggage handler, as she'd told me several times on the trip out.

It wasn't until I had all my system components piled up on the center of the compass—excuse, Compass, I mean (they'd want it that way)—that someone broke loose from the group and came over. To examine the boxes, as it turned out. She refused to notice me until she heard the whiny hum of the flyer as it lifted off outside.

"Are these for Caverty?" she asked, putting one hand on top of the pile proprietarily.

I put my own hand atop the pile, even with hers. "Not exactly. I'm the pathosfinder."

The silver and gold weave eyebrows went up. In the middle of the day, they gave her the look of someone who hasn't gone home from last night's party yet. So did the rest of her outfit, which seemed to be a collection of swatches from this season's best fabrics or something, predominantly silver and gold with the textures varying. Fandango would have tried to buy it right off her back.

"Pathosfinder," she said, tasting the word uncertainly. "I don't think—" she shrugged. "I'm sorry, I don't remember us ordering a pathosfinder." She turned to the other people still clustered over near the foot of a curving marble and ebony staircase. "Anyone put in an order for a pathosfinder?"

"Caverty did," I said before any of them could answer. "You should ask him."

The grey eyes widened; not biogems, I noticed, but eyes that looked like eyes. It seemed kind of out of character for her. "Oh, no," she said. "Caverty works with an empath, everybody knows that."

"He still works with an empath," I said, "only he's also going to be working with me temporarily."

The woman shrugged again. "I'm sorry, I don't think you understand how things are. If Caverty ordered some equipment from you, I'm sure he means to use it himself somehow, but I know that he didn't order you to come with it. You can leave the equipment here and I'll see that he gets it and sends your company a receipt but—" She was starting to show me the egress when the chandelier said, in a cheery, female voice, "You're a lousy doorman,

Priscilla, you should stick to partying. I'm coming right down."

For several moments, all Priscilla did was gape up at the chandelier with her mouth open. I stole a look at the little group by the stairs; the Emotional Indices ranged from apprehension to mild indignation to somewhat malicious satisfaction. I felt myself going over a mental speed bump. The milieu here was going to be a bitch to get around, and it would no doubt be reproduced in some way in Caverty's mind. Terrific, I thought. As if the job weren't already hard enough, I had a complicated social structure to clamber around on. *NN, you old bastard.*

Then another woman came trotting down the staircase. "Ah, here we are. The pathosfinder. Alexandra Haas, right? Deadpan Allie?" Somehow her hitting the foot of the stairs shooed everyone, including Priscilla, away; they flowed off into a room to the left, or west, according to the Compass.

"Sorry about that," said the woman. She was all business, tailored, no frills, brown all over, including her eyes, which were some kind of artificial gem the color of oak. "Sometimes the Entourage gets a little out of hand around here. I'm Harmony. At least, Caverty hopes I am." She laughed. "I'm kind of the general factotum, grand scheduler, traffic director, hall monitor. I try to keep things harmonious. I'm the one who contacted your agency about you. I've done quite a lot of research on pathosfinders; I'm really happy you were able to take the job."

I nodded. "Thanks. I need a place to stash my equipment and then I'd like to meet Caverty."

"I've had a room prepared for you upstairs, away from the general fooforaw and infighting—"

"Somewhere close to Caverty, I hope?" I said, as she tried to herd me toward the stairs. "I like to be as available and accessible to a client as possible."

Harmony's face clouded slightly. "Oh. Well. I, uh, I'd really have to check that out with Caverty. He has his own section of the house where no one else stays, out of respect to his need for a private working environment. You're experienced with creative people, so I guess you know how that is."

"I understand completely. However, clients sometimes feel that they have to see me right away, in the middle of the night or whatever. I need to be easily available."

Harmony smiled with indulgence. "There's nowhere you can go in this house where you would not be available to Caverty on a moment's notice or less. Everyone here understands that. It *is* his house, after all."

I opened my mouth, thought quickly, and shut it again. Trying to explain to her that I was not just another body added to the general Entourage population wasn't going to penetrate; I could tell. She was sure she knew the kind of people who stayed in Caverty's house, she was one of them. "My

system—" I said, gesturing at the stack of components still sitting in the center of the Compass.

"I've already taken care of that. It'll be moved up to your room for you."

"I'll just wait here, then, until I see everything moved."

The professional mask almost slipped. She caught herself before she could sigh and spoke into her brown bracelet instead. "Entry hall right *now*." Four people with straps and handtrucks emerged from a door half-hidden by the start of the curve of the staircase. They weren't exactly in uniform but there was a sameness to them and I knew immediately from their posture that they weren't Entourage. They were employees.

"We don't do that much heavy lifting and moving large objects around here," Harmony said as the hired help labored along behind us with my system. "The people who come and go here tend to travel light, although we haven't actually had anyone leave for a long time. Leave permanently, I mean. Which is good. For all of Caverty's—oh, I don't know what you'd call it, wildness of heart or freedom of spirit, I guess—for all that, he really needs a stable living situation. And things have really stabilized here. It's good. I think you'll see that while you're here."

Even though I was getting short of breath on those damned stairs, I had to do breathing exercises to maintain the deadpan. She made my skin crawl.

<<BREAK>>

Whoa. Have to stop sometimes. That boost. Too vivid sometimes. I don't know why I'm reliving this for you anyway, NN. I mean, can you appreciate it? What do I think I'm doing, making art or something? I'm no artist, not in that sense. But I'm the best pathosfinder in the hemisphere. Right? You made me the best pathosfinder in the hemisphere, remember? You did it. And you know, that was nothing compared to what some people can do to you.

I know what you're saying right now. I went into it with a bad attitude. Isn't that what you're saying? I know it is, even though—chuckle, chuckle—I doubt I could actually understand you if I were there right now and you were saying it to me. Clang-clang, clang-clang.

Um, bad attitude. Yes, you'd say I'd gone into it with a bad attitude. Now what kind of a thing is that for someone trading on the name Deadpan Allie, and my reputation and all. Well, I'll tell you. It's knowing when you're in a bad situation. I wanted to pack up and go right then. Leaving aside the skin crawling and that stuff (interesting mental image, there, pack up and go and leave aside the skin crawling; there I go meandering again, bear with me, it happens, did I mention that? I guess I did but it's too late to go back and see if I really did because I can't read that part any more.). So. Even if my skin hadn't been crawling like a lizard, like a million little tiny lizards, I should

have seen it was already too hard. Pathosfinding you need privacy for. Go down and root around in somebody's soul like that; the client gets embarrassed in front of *me* sometimes. Facing someone else can be impossible. Caverty should have known that, he was a professional, he'd worked with a pathosfinder years before, before he'd discovered his empath.

So that was mainly why I stayed, you know. I wanted to check that out, see this empath and Caverty, get a feel for how they worked and why Caverty wanted to work that way. But I think I must have had it in the back of my mind that I was going to leave after that, unless Caverty could disentangle himself from his empath and his Harmony and the rest of the Entourage. So I could work him properly.

Disentangle? Did I really say that?

I don't know. I can't read it any more.

Harmony gave me the house tour. Done-over mansion, the usual things overdone as well as done over. Ten thousand rooms, not counting bedrooms. Ballrooms, dining rooms, sitting rooms, room rooms, an art gallery, a theatre where Caverty showed his holos if he felt like it. That last wasn't the way Harmony put it but that was the general idea, or so I gathered from her Emotional Index.

Reading the Emotional Index of someone who is trying like hell to give you the best impression can be amusing or annoying, depending on your mood. Occasionally I found myself feeling one way or the other about it but mostly I felt uneasy. She'd fallen into some kind of PR ramadoola that she was running on me. Silliness; you don't give a pathosfinder PR because she finds out what the truth is right away. But Harmony was straining to make me happy or get some kind of approval from me. Maybe because she thought then I'd do a better job with her boss?

No, that wasn't it. She was trying to *sell* me something. Or convert me.

Oh, yes. Once I saw it, there was no way not to see it. But never mind. Sooner or later, I'd get to Caverty and I wouldn't have to bother with Harmony or Priscilla the Party Baby or anyone else in the Entourage.

"I need to see Caverty as soon as possible," I told Harmony as she led me down yet another upstairs hall toward yet another room she thought she had to show me. "He *is* my client, I have to let him know I've arrived."

Harmony turned to look at me with mild surprise. "But—were you thinking of starting work today?"

"If Caverty wanted to start in five minutes, I'd do my best to be ready."

"He won't want to start today, I'm positive. And I'm sure someone must have told him you're here." The smile turned a little hard. "Perhaps Priscilla. Anyway, wouldn't you like to get comfortable, settle in a little, get to know the place? Not to mention all of us. Caverty's group. I know he'd like you

to feel like you're a part of things. I mean, if you're going to be here awhile—"

"I don't actually know how long I'll be here. I won't have any idea until Caverty and I begin working together, and even then it'll be hard to say. Pathosfinding isn't a simple business. And that doesn't even come into it. Some extremely complicated jobs have taken less than a day to complete while others that were more straightforward took weeks." I resisted the temptation to look apologetic; not hard, really, because they *don't* call me Deadpan Allie for nothing, but her proselytizing was working at me, trying to find a way in, at least to my politeness sympathies. "I really must speak to Caverty, whether we begin working today or two weeks from now. He's my client."

Harmony spread her hands and then clasped them together with a little sigh. Her nails were also painted brown, I noticed. That shouldn't have seemed bizarre. "Well. If you must, you must. Could I at least phone him and tell him we're coming? Is that all right?"

"Of course."

She stepped into a room which seemed to be a souvenir gallery of some kind—still holos alongside flat pictures promoting one or other of Caverty's works, things that might have been awards, props, or just items he (or someone) had wanted to keep for sentimental reasons. Not a junk room; it was all neat and very organized. I glanced around while Harmony used a talk-only phone on a seven-tiered ceramic table. She didn't say much and she didn't say it to Caverty, I was pretty sure. The Entourage has a completely different way of talking to the Man (or Woman) than they do to each other, and for each other, they had their own pecking order that was never quite congruent with the Man's idea of who was over whom. Harmony was talking to an equal, without a doubt and, without a doubt, that wasn't the empath.

"He says come right up," Harmony said, replacing the phone. "Caverty lives at the top of the house; starting on this floor, there are elevators so we don't have to climb a million stairs." The smile was forced now, though I wouldn't have been able to tell if I hadn't known how to read an Emotional Index. She really hadn't wanted to take me to Caverty today at all and I couldn't figure that out. She'd chosen me (according to her, anyway); her own comfort was contingent on my helping the Man but she was reluctant to let me near him. Not completely reluctant—just for today. Tomorrow. Mañana, no problem. Entourages could be funny things. I had a passing thought that Caverty had better turn out to be worth it after the obstacle course I was having to run to get to him.

Well, of course, he had the whole top floor of the house, though the main

room where he did most of his living and working was a big studio at the rear of the building, where he could look out a fan-shaped, floor-to-ceiling window at cultivated rolling country. He was sitting at the window when Harmony led me in—I was never going to walk with Harmony, I saw, she was always going to lead—off to the left side, looking away from the sunset, which was visible through another much smaller window behind him. A woman was sitting at his feet, one hand resting casually on his ankle. I could just barely hear their voices in quiet conversation. Harmony looked around, saw no one else and nearly panicked.

“I talked to Langtree, *he* told me to come up,” she said, ostensibly to me but actually so Caverty would hear and know that she hadn’t just taken it upon herself to barge in. Whatever happened to *Caverty says come right up*, I wondered.

“It’s all right, Harmony,” Caverty called out. There was a slight echo off the mostly empty walls. “I sent Langtree out.”

“Oh,” she breathed, pretending to fan herself relievedly with one brown-tipped hand, “that’s good, I’m glad I wasn’t interrupting anything important—”

“You weren’t,” Caverty said good-naturedly. He had one of those voices that would sound good-natured all the time, even when it was chewing someone out. “You’re okay, Harmony, thanks for everything. You can go now, too, take a break, get some rest. Have a drink, have kinky sex, whatever you want.”

Harmony gave one of those full-bodied *ha-ha-ha* laughs and sort of backed out of the room, looking from me to Caverty and the woman on the floor and back again.

“The pathosfinder,” Caverty said to me.

“The pathosfinder. Yes.” I looked around. The holo equipment was in an untidy pile in the right-hand corner nearest the door. Except for one of the cameras and a couple of colored lights, it all looked as though it hadn’t been touched for a long time, not even to be cleaned. For me, that will always be what a creative block really looks like, in the mind or in the world: a pile of mostly unused equipment, gathering dust.

Caverty didn’t get up. “Come closer,” he said. “Please.”

I walked across the room slowly enough to have time to look at both of them. Caverty was a solidly built man, more good-looking than he really needed to be. Sculpture, of course; these days everyone’s from Mt. Olympus, with bone structure to die for (which, of course, you have to pay for and only the filthoid rich can pay for custom designs like the one Caverty had). But on Caverty, there was a sense of overkill about his attractiveness, too many nice things crammed into one place.

The same could not be said about the woman sitting on the floor. There

was a naturalness about her that was also very expensive, except she hadn't bought her looks. She stopped short of being delicate—*fine* was the way that old bastard NN would have put it. Aquamarine eyes; the facets in the pupils glittered like tears. Thick, dark straight hair cut ragamuffin-style that would have made Fandango reconsider her dreadlocks. Thin as a ballet dancer but without any sense of a dancer's liveness. I realized belatedly that she had stolen my attention away from Caverty completely.

Caverty looked up at me with the start of a smile. "My empath, Madeleine." He pronounced it *Mad-a-LAYNE*. "We were just enjoying some quiet moments at the end of the day. No matter what I'm doing I try to take time to enjoy those few moments before the daylight fades." He shifted position slightly, adjusting his caftan. It was grey, very thick and heavily textured, mimicking a handweave. "Although we never watch the sunset. I don't believe in such things of course but Harmony says that west is definitely not my direction. I'm northeast. Which is why this house is perfect for me. According to the Compass, I mean, if you believe such things. I don't imagine pathosfinders put any more stock in them than holo artists." He looked at Madeleine. "Or empaths?"

She gave a short, breathy laugh. "We've known each other far too long for you to have to ask that."

"How long is that?" I asked conversationally.

They had to look at each other before they could answer me. "Fifteen years," Caverty said, while Madeleine nodded. "That is, we've known each other for fifteen years; we've been working together for eight. Of course, just knowing Madeleine affected me deeply, even before we began working together. Affected my work. So perhaps we have been working together the whole time we've known each other. She's been working *on* me, anyway." He chuckled, looking at his empath fondly while she sat under his praise smiling demurely at her knees.

"Before that, how often did you work with a pathosfinder?" I asked.

They both looked up at me with mild surprise. "Maybe once, twice a year," Caverty said. "It isn't the sort of thing you can do all the time. Why?"

"I was just wondering. For the sake of the job. It can help before we start if I know a little about your last mindplay experience."

"Bless me, Allie, for I have sinned. It has been eight years since my last mindplay experience. With a pathosfinder. I can barely remember it now, it seems."

Madeleine gave him a soft pat on the leg.

"Could I ask why you feel the need to work with one now after all these years?"

Caverty took a deep breath. "I need something different. My work needs something different. Have you seen any of my holos?"

"I've seen all of them, including your last release, *Dinners Between Dinners*."

"Retitled *Food Fight* by the critics," he said with a hint of hurt feelings. "Not that there wasn't something to what some of them said. There is no easy way to look at yourself and see that you're getting stale. Especially when you were considered an innovator early in your career. You have no idea how excruciating it is to have to give up the position of Promising Young Turk because all your Promising Young Turk stuff has become an old story. People begin to recognize the devices you fall back on as, well, the devices you fall back on. I thought it was time to explore some different things."

"And what about you?" I said to the empath.

She sat up slightly, blinking. "What do you mean?"

"What will you be doing?"

"When?"

"While Caverty's exploring these different things?"

"Why, what I always do. I'll be empathizing." Her tiny smile grew even tinier. "Won't I?" She looked to Caverty.

He leaned over to say something to her, paused, and frowned up at me. "Won't she?"

Time for the tightrope walk fifty yards above the glass net. "There are, I'm sure, pathosfinders who will work with a tandem of any kind. And there are pathosfinders who work with empaths—"

"Is there something wrong with empaths?" she asked. Not a bit defensive, either; her Emotional Index was devoid of any hostility. She just wanted to know. I felt myself relax a little.

"Well, when you're mindplaying, the system facilitating the contact between minds imposes a certain amount of order on the encounter—there's a medium for the minds to interact within, strict boundary conditions that keep separate entities truly separate so that there isn't any confusion as to whose thoughts are whose, and a certain amount of protocol that reinforces the personal sense of security."

She nodded. "Yes."

"Yes." I waited and she waited with me. "I mean, that's it. That's what it is."

She looked at me doubtfully. "That's what's wrong with empaths?" Caverty's posture changed very subtly to a protective position.

"I'm sorry, I didn't actually mean there was anything wrong with empaths. What I mean is—well, that's why I don't work with empaths. I thought the agency made that clear."

Caverty rubbed his chin with two fingers. "They didn't."

"I'm surprised. My agency has always been careful to spell out exactly what the mindplayers do. And don't do."

"Well, that's all right anyway," Caverty said, warmth flowing into his voice from somewhere deep inside. "You don't have to work with an empath. *I* work with an empath. That will do."

"Will it do for you not to work with an empath while you're working with me?"

Caverty's smile shrank somewhat. "You mean while we're hooked in together or the whole time you're here?"

I didn't look at Madeleine. "The whole time I'm here."

"Oh..." He slumped back in his chair and stared intently at the toes of his slippers. Doeskin slippers, possibly synthetic but then again, perhaps not. This was the home of the filthoid rich, after all. "I—I'm not sure."

Madeleine reached out to put a hand on his knee and then changed her mind, showing me that she was letting him make his own decision this time.

"I'm not sure I'm capable of doing that," he said. "Madeleine and I—we've been together for so long—not working with Madeleine is—it would be like not working with air."

"Oh, Caverty," Madeleine said. "You have to do what is best for your work."

I wasn't sure I could take the sudden emotional charge pressurizing the room. All at once, there seemed to be a heaviness on my solar plexus, the way you feel when you barge in on some kind of intimate scene, or perhaps when it barges in on you. But they don't call me Deadpan Allie for nothing. *For fun, maybe, hey, NN? Depends on your idea of fun.* I waited it out; Caverty and the empath rode it out. Without moving, either.

Presently, she said, "You should try it, Caverty. You have to try it, you owe it to yourself, you owe it to your work. We both know you've gotten stale—"

"Don't say that too loud, the critics might have the place bugged." They smiled sadly at each other in lieu of laughing.

"Try it," she said. "It'll be...different. You need something different. Something besides me."

Did she think I was completely stupid? Or just stupid enough not to know how to read an Emotional Index? Hers said she believed he needed nothing of the sort, that she would continue to be the one and only thing he needed, work or no work.

But then, she was an empath. Maybe it wasn't her Emotional Index I was reading but his.

I resisted the urge to blink several times and maintained as much neutrality as I could, which, under the circumstances, wasn't really very much. Just by being there I was pitting myself against her, forcing a choice between us.

She got up suddenly. "Try it now. Just here, just the two of you."

He reached out for her, about to protest.

"No. I insist. This is your *career*, Caverty. It's all right, I'm not going anywhere except out of the room. You know I'll always be here for you."

She gave me a quick, level, professional-to-professional smile as she passed me on her way out. Caverty looked after her with dismay, fear, and guilt fighting it out for dominance on his handsome face. He stared at the door for a long time after she shut it. Then finally his attention came over to me.

"And now what?" he asked, spreading his hands. They were shaking a little.

"Now not so much. I thought we might talk. Get acquainted. I don't like to go cold into contact with someone's mind and I'm sure you wouldn't want to, either."

"Oh, no, certainly not." He shifted position in the chair, trying to get comfortable. It was a very comfortable chair, not one of those living contour things that adjusts itself to your every little move, just a very receptive inanimate, but it was impossible for him now that Madeleine was out of the room. "What, ah, do you need to know? Oh, dinner's coming up. We don't want to miss dinner. The meals around here are *prima*."

The sun had gone down and, as it had grown progressively darker outside, the lights had come up in perfect equilibrium with the fading sunlight so that you almost didn't notice the change.

"We won't miss any meals. Pathosfinding doesn't require that anyone starve for their art." I wanted to go over to him but I had no intention of sitting at his feet. I looked around for another chair, spotted one near the pile of equipment and dragged it over so I could sit across from him.

"That's good," he said, stealing a glance at the door again. "I doubt that I could, any more. I've grown too used to eating regularly and well." Pause, and then a rueful smile. "That being why I called you in."

"At this point, you wouldn't starve if you never worked up another holo. It's a different kind of need now."

He squinted at me with thoughtful surprise. "You *know*."

"Yes, I know. I've worked with many, many artists of many different kinds." *And empaths aren't the only ones who know how other people feel*, I added to myself. "You can do lots of things to keep from starving, but only one thing to produce your art."

"Absolute. Just absolute." He nodded, feeling comfortable for all of three seconds. "That's the truth." He put his hand on his stomach. "Was that me? Did you hear that? My stomach just roared like a wild animal. I think I can smell dinner from here."

Let him go, said some small part of my mind. Probably the last shred of my common sense. Let him go, let him cling to his empath and later you can

hook in with him and fail and go home none the worse for wear.

"I need to be able to look at any holos you have available for viewing around here."

"Oh. Certainly."

"And it would be best if we could look at them together."

"Oh.... Yes, I guess it would."

"But we don't have to do that before dinner."

"After dinner?" He looked a little pale.

"Tomorrow will be soon enough. I did just get here, after all."

Now he really came to life. "Oh, of course, this is really thoughtless of me, keeping you here when you'd probably like to get some rest and you must be hungry, too—"

He babbled both of us out of the room. I broke away and made a stop at my quarters before heading down to the dining room, which in any other place would have been known as a banquet hall.

<<BREAK>>

Now, NN, I *know*, I just *know* you're picking up on my hostility toward the empath. The poor innocent empath. What on earth have I got against empaths? And how can I be so unprofessional as to show it?

Hang me, shoot me—emotional criminal!

I told you, I didn't work with empaths. It feels indecent, doing something like that without a machine.

Hang me, shoot me—emotional prude! You just can't win in this business. I always knew that.

But I'll tell you what else I don't like about empaths. I know all about empathy; you know that, you taught me everything I know, right? You do still claim that, don't you? Sure you do, I know you. Yah, I know all about empathy; empaths are something else.

There's something about empaths touching you—not even touching you, being around you. You just know they're soaking it all up, whatever it is. They're always just—soaking it all up. Drinking you in. You're supposed to feel such kinship with them. You're not alone any more, someone knows exactly how you feel, someone's walked a mile in your moccasins. But what's that for, anyway? Yah, I know, so you feel you're not alone any more, right, we said that, didn't we. Didn't I, excuse me, I'm doing all of the semi-talking. But what's it really for? What possible survival value can that have? For you, I mean—you the regular person. What's the survival value of feeling such kinship with someone, of not feeling alone any more emotionally. Pretend you're a regular person instead of a dried up old bastard just for the sake of example, okay, NN? The survival value of, yes, empaths in terms of you, the regular person. Well, there is none. Not for you.

It's all for the empath. When you know exactly how anyone—*every-one*—feels, that's a pretty powerful survival tool. In fact, you'd probably end up doing a lot more than just surviving with it. Survive and thrive, yah; and soaking it all up all the time, you'd get terribly—*accustomed* to it, more than accustomed, *addicted*. Except that's not quite the word. I mean, are you *addicted* to air?

Yah, so what's in it for you, the regular person? (You pretend like you're a regular person, okay, NN, or have I already asked you to do that?) What's in it for you? I mean, shouldn't you get something out of this? Well, sure you should, and you do.

You get to *like* having someone crawling around in your emotions, feeling them with you, and letting you feel other emotions from other people.

Except maybe *like* is the wrong word.

Do you *like* air?

Caverty had thirty pairs of moccasins, by the way, and Mad-a-LAYNE had had her sensitive little soles in every one of them.

It was a banquet hall, but the type of place where you sat down in one spot only if you really wanted to, if you were tired or something. Most of the Entourage were gypsy diners, the type of people who seem to be reluctant to light anywhere even semi-permanently, in case they should see a better place to sit. So they were all cruising around, plates or cups or whatever in hand, cocktail-party style, working at enjoying themselves.

I'd stopped off at my room for a change of clothes and a dose of solitude so I could refortify myself. There wasn't time for even the quickest mental exercise with the system, unless I wanted to miss a good portion of the dinner time dynamics and something told me I didn't want to miss very much in this house.

I managed to arrive in the dining room before both Caverty and Madeleine, which meant dinner was not quite underway. You could tell that by the general demeanor of the room. The entire Entourage was in a waiting mode.

Quite a mixed bag, this Entourage. There had to be at least thirty of them, acting out their inner lives. A few were dressed after certain animals; bears or lions seemed to be the fashion, though I spotted a couple of chicken people. At least, they looked like chicken people to me. A peacock might have been appropriate in some cases but no one cared to be quite that obvious. There was an umbrella woman who took up a lot of space; at various times, her umbrella skirt would open or shut for some private reason of her own, following no pattern I could see. I saw Priscilla with her little group; she'd changed some of the swatches on her outfit and polished her metallics so that she twinkled under the chandeliers. The members of her

group were now each wearing an outfit made from one of her swatches. You might have briefly mistaken them for the focal point of the Entourage. On second glance, they'd have reminded you of nothing so much as some kind of in-house organization. Like security guards. It would figure, I thought, helping myself to a bowl of something fragrant. If definite job assignments weren't made, individuals within the Entourage would automatically fall into certain roles, depending on their personalities. Priscilla was a natural for the cops.

I was looking around for a place to sit when someone finally chose to notice me. I'd noticed him wading along behind me as I'd made my way to the buffet. It would have been hard not to notice him. He was at least six-three and bulky and where he wasn't bulky, he was hairy; the kind of person who makes you feel crowded just by being nearby. I'd figured I'd mix in among everyone as though there were nothing unusual about my being there but he planted himself in front of me, cutting off most of my view of the room and said, "You're new here."

His tone was politely matter-of-fact, not accusatory at all; wherever he fit in here, he wasn't the cops. "Yes, I am," I said, shifting position so a woman in a harlequinesque outfit could pass behind me.

"Did you come to join?" he asked, reaching around me for a bowl of the same stuff I had. His arms were so long he barely had to move.

"No, I'm—"

"Didn't think so." He smiled cheerily. "I always know when someone's coming in to join. Hasn't happened in an awfully long time. Came alone, didn't you?"

I nodded. "I was just upstairs talking to Caverty and Mad-a-LAYNE."

His eyebrows went up very slightly. "It's a good group here. Good balance of all different kinds." Priscilla cruised by closely enough to hear what we were saying. My bulky friend looked at her for a few moments with mild hostility on his dark furry face. "Mostly a good balance. When you've got *all* kinds, you've got all kinds. But as long as they serve their purpose and don't just take up space and eat up all the food, you can tolerate just about anyone." He looked down at me again. "Of course, we're all on the same side here," he added quickly. "There may be a slob here and there, but they're *our* slob. If you get what I mean."

"Couldn't be clearer."

"I'm Arlen. Some people call me The Bear, but not to my face." He chuckled into his beard. "Of course, they don't know *I* started them calling me The Bear. Planted the name myself. I figured if they were going to be calling me something, I might as well have some say over what it was."

"Is that name insulting to you?" I asked.

"Hell, no. But *they* think it is." He laughed again. "Some people, if they

think they're insulting you, it's all they need to know. And that's how you survive in an Entourage." He herded me a few feet away from the buffet table. "What's your name and what are you planning to do here besides survive?"

"Allie. Deadpan Allie, actually, and I'm a pathosfinder." I'd finally managed to rumple his smooth. "Pathosfinder?" He actually stepped back from me. "For *who*? Not Caverty?"

A white-blond woman in a shimmering blue Japanese-style kimono turned around. "Pathosfinder?" The word echoed, flowing out into the people immediately around us and I found myself in the middle of a minor group within the group instead of just being among them.

"Who called you?" the Nordic-looking woman asked, worry large on her luminous face. "Is it my fault?"

Arlen The Bear patted her shoulder gently with a huge paw-like hand. "That's not quite the right question, Lina. Poor Lina thinks any time something goes wrong around here, she's somehow to blame for not spotting the problem early enough."

"For some people, sensitivity has to be cultivated, worked on every moment, waking *and* sleeping," the woman explained to me anxiously. "Otherwise, they get hardened to everything without ever realizing it because being *insensitive* is their natural state of mind. And it can be contagious, too, insensitivity can. It can spread from just one person to infect a whole group and pretty soon you can have a whole population incapable of feeling for their fellow human being."

"Yes," I said, "but—"

"So that's why I asked if our needing a pathosfinder was my fault." She looked up at Arlen with begging eyes. Icy-blue eyes, I noticed. "*Is* it me, Arlen? You'd tell me, wouldn't you?"

Arlen's laugh was kindly as he gave her a gentle hug. "Sure I would, but by the time I did, you'd already have been told several times by everyone else. Stop worrying. She isn't here because of anything you've done wrong. But she hasn't yet said why she *is* here." His expression was a little less kindly now; I'd upset one of their own. God knew how they were going to receive the fact that I was going to be messing with the Entourage's *raison d'être*. But we can't lie to anyone directly involved with a client, whether it's a friend, enemy, parent, Entourage or something even more baroque. Not unless it's to save someone's life. *Suppose it's your own life?* I'd once asked NN. *Don't be silly*, he'd said. *Who'd want to kill you?*

I thought about that as I said, "I'm here for Caverty."

Nobody said anything. A third of my audience backed off.

"Caverty called you?" Arlen asked finally. "He must have. I can't believe it. All these years with Madeleine and now—" He shook his head a

little. "What are you going to—I mean, are you—"

"I'm not replacing Mad-a-LAYNE permanently." I could hear the sighs of relief above the general chatter in the room. "I really hadn't meant to create a disturbance," I said, glancing to my right, where the umbrella woman was getting the news that there was a pathosfinder at large from a waifish type in black secondskins. "I'm going to do some work with Caverty and when its done, I'll be leaving and life will go on."

"Maybe you won't want to leave," said a chubby man in a pouch suit, ordinary except for the fact that it seemed to be padded to make him even chubbier.

"Yah. You might really get to like it here," said the Nordic woman. "That happens."

"I have some things to go back to that are very important to me," I said politely.

"What?" asked The Bear with what seemed to be genuine curiosity.

"Ah..." Something told me they weren't going to perceive my career as suitably important. I seized the first thing that came into my head. "There's Fandango."

"An important *someone*?" asked the Nordic woman.

"Ask him to come here. He might like it," the Bear suggested.

"Her. She. I, uh, no, I couldn't."

"It's up to you," said the man in the pouch suit. "But don't count it out completely, staying here. You just might. You never know."

The general babble in the room changed its tone and I knew without even looking that Caverty had come in.

Immediately, their attention went directly to him, allowing me to slide out of the spotlight and into the general crowd. Slipping between derelicts and duchess types, I made my way over to a small raised area containing a few small tables where I could sit and regroup. A few chiffon fanciers lingered by the steps up to the area; I managed to pass them unnoticed, in spite of the fact that I'd dipped the corner of somebody's scarf in my dish. If he didn't care, I didn't.

Relieved to be out of the general crowd, I didn't see that there was someone else sitting at the table I'd chosen until I was about to sample the night's entree.

"You're new here," he said.

I paused with my spoon nearly at my lips.

"Only the new people choose to sit up here. The very new and the very old." He smiled with the left half of his mouth; his diamond eyes twinkled. Diamond biogems are seldom a good choice but his olive skin kept him from looking too much like a willing victim of blindness. He was older than someone you'd expect to find in an Entourage, and not as done over as the

average citizen. The nose had been broken at least once, but the effect wasn't homely. He'd have reminded you of your father, if that was your orientation. It wasn't mine. To me, he looked only like a graying, older man in comfortably baggy shirt and pants, too sensible to be here but staying anyway for some reason of his own.

"It's Madeleine they're all so worried about," he continued, watching as the room rearranged itself around Caverty's presence.

"Not Caverty?"

"Oh, of course, Caverty. Both of them, really. We don't have one without the other here, as you must know. But they're worried about Caverty in terms of Madeleine and what you mean for her. I know. I've been here with the Entourage since before it was formally an Entourage. I may have founded the Entourage. Or helped found it. I came to him, others came. Then we were a caravan." He paused to watch a woman wearing a jewel-encrusted cage over her face and neck make her way through the room. One of the chicken people stopped her and they embraced warmly.

"I know all their dynamics, small and large. I direct the domestic drama here. At one time or another, I've gotten all of them to play at least some small part. Caverty finds it amusing, I think, to watch other people besides himself have problems, even if they're just staged. And once he based a holo on one of my scenarios—*Dinners Between Dinners*, after my scenario, *Food Fight*."

"You don't say."

"That was the only instance, though. Usually I cribbed from him now and then. As a kind of tribute to his work. And as a kind of tribute to being fresh out of ideas at the time, too." He fell silent, watching Caverty moving among his Entourage.

The Entourage both moved aside for him and crowded around him all at once. It was as though a new element had been dropped into simmering waters. Caverty slipped among them much more easily than I'd been able to, maneuvering effortlessly, balancing socializing and finger food. He ate a little, held court, ate a little more, held a little more court—a reception, I realized. Every night, the Entourage gave him a reception of the type he'd probably gotten on the debut of a new holo. Not so unusual, really. Performers become addicted to applause quite easily. But Caverty had found a way to get a fix of applause every day—more often than that, if he wanted—without having to go through the tiresome business of working for it.

"Get it direct, from producer to consumer," I muttered.

"Pardon?"

I shrugged. "Just a stray thought."

The man got up with a smile and tossed a cloth napkin onto the table.

"Well, I should go say 'good evening' to the great man."

"Do you always do this?"

"Every night, dinner's an occasion here. Didn't they tell you?"

"I mean, you personally going over to pay your respects." Mildly troubled frown.

"I stay here by his good graces. I eat his food, take up space, ply my trade, all by virtue of his hospitality. Once a day, I can let the man know how I feel." He paused, studying me for a moment. "You have to mean something here, you know. Whether you stay or not." Then he looked toward Caverty, prepared a friendly smile, and moved away, straightening his clothes.

It took him over a minute to make his way through the cluster around Caverty, not because it was so crowded, really, but because some of the *couture* was voluminous, like the umbrella lady, and because they were all deferring to each other as well as socializing among themselves, while Caverty favored each person who reached him with more than just token conversation. Didn't the novelty ever wear off, for any of them?

Off to one side, I saw that Harmony had appeared amid the near-fringe of the ragged circle around 'the great man' and was subtly directing traffic, moving people along so they could greet Caverty in turn and moving those who'd already spoken to him away without seeming to. Caverty was facing in her general direction, reinforcing the idea of them getting in line for him. It might have been engineered, but it had the look and feel of incidental choreography—they'd fallen into doing things this way and as long as it worked, they'd keep doing it.

I tried to catch the expression on each face as the Entourage members paid their respects and turned away but I wasn't close enough to see them all. The ones I could see looked content, or satisfied, or, I don't know—appeased, somehow, the way children look when they all go home from the party with a gift. Which was probably the case.

Caverty looked the same way; a little drawn and besieged, perhaps, but generally content. Appeased. Happy, even.

He shouldn't have been. He should have felt tired and put upon and too in demand. *But then, I thought, if he's not giving any of himself to his work, he has plenty left to give to his Entourage. Right, Allie?*

No, wrong—he supposedly wasn't doing any work because he didn't have any inside him, so he shouldn't have had anything to offer this live-in applause machine. So what exactly was he giving them and where was it coming from?

I scanned the room again and found her at last. She was at the opposite end of an invisible straight line that ran from Harmony through Caverty. That look. She could have been in religious trance; she could have been gazing at her firstborn child; she could have been dreaming of a lover or

fantasizing a murder behind that look. Her Emotional Index shifted, melted, segued through a thousand different states in less time than it took to think about it.

The food, I noticed, had been completely forgotten. Or maybe not so much forgotten as dropped, like any other pretense.

<<BREAK>>

All right, NN, three quick choruses of *What's It All About?* and if you haven't figured it out by then, you're a candidate for brain salad.

Yah, well, what do you think I did after that? I got the hell out of there and went off to my room, my luxuriously appointed room with the singing, vibrating bed and custom-built lavabo and tried to compose a message which would convey beautifully and inarguably why the Entourage had to leave as soon as they could pack themselves up. Halfway through the start of the sixth draft, I plugged into a memory boost and relived the scene for myself, for reinforcement, so I could make it more—I don't know, urgent? Real? Immediate? So he could see it as I saw it. And then I realized he couldn't see it as I saw it and not be too alienated to work with me. I was already separating him and Mad-a-LAYNE. Madeleine. But I kept thinking of her in that exaggerated way. Mad-a-LAYNE. Mad-a-LAYNE. Mad-a-LAYNE in PAIN falls MAINly in your BRAIN.

I'd started yawning midway through the second holo. By the start of the third, I had to ask Caverty for coffee. He roused himself from the stupor I'd nearly fallen into and dialled some up from the bar near the projection booth.

"Am I supposed to ask you what you think?" he said as we perched on antique stools together.

"I really don't know what you're *supposed* to do."

Caverty laughed a little. "Neither do I, most of the time. As you can probably guess. Actually, I don't have to ask. I was comatose from boredom myself."

"Your own boredom with your work isn't much of a barometer. However you feel about your work is tied up in the difficulties you're having right now, so you're not a terribly reliable judge."

He glanced over his shoulder briefly and I squelched the urge to tell him Madeleine wasn't there. Today he was a bit less uncomfortable in her absence but he was still looking around for her. "Maybe not, but I used to know when the work was good. At least, I thought I did. Now I'm beginning to think I spent close to two decades fooling myself." He stared gloomily into his coffee cup.

We'd watched one holo from his beginning phase and one from his experimental. Both had been narrative pieces, the stories simple while the

embellishment was complex, especially in the experimental work. He'd been very young when he'd done that one, though it had come after the previous piece. He'd just been discovering how much fun it was to break the rules and from time to time, ghost images of himself with his holocam had drifted through the piece, recording other ghost images as well as the central scene in progress. It was the sort of thing most artists do sooner or later and usually it's a bad choice but somehow, Caverty had made it work, either through luck or sheer talent, or perhaps a combination of the two. It left an aftertaste in the brain; your memory kept returning to it, going over the core story—boy meets self, boy gets self, boy loses self, boy buys new self—while the trimmings drifted around as vividly in memory as they'd been in the holo itself.

The interesting part was that Caverty had used minimal sound—no dialog, no musical scoring, few sound effects except as a kind of punctuation here and there, and yet you tended to remember more sound than he'd used. While I wasn't sure that I really liked it, it did seem to summarize all of Caverty's strong points as an artist. I didn't want to ask him how autobiographical it was; artists never really know exactly how autobiographical any of their work is. I could find out later if I really wanted to know.

"You're very quiet," Caverty said. "That, uh, well...*scares* me."

"I'm not a critic. You have to stop thinking of me as some kind of master evaluator."

"But you are, aren't you? Evaluating my talent, how you can help me. *If* you can help me." Pause while he drained his coffee. "*Can* you help me? How bad off *is* this patient, doctor?"

"How bad off do you feel?"

"If you're going to tell me it's all up to me—"

"Not exactly. It's a matter of how much help you're willing to accept; then it's a matter of how much help you'll be able to accept. Plus a lot of other things." I pushed my coffee aside. "This isn't something I discuss in detail with my clients, as it tends to make them far too self-conscious. I don't want you getting in your own way."

He nodded absently, glancing over his shoulder again. "Well. How many more holos did you want to see?"

"One representative piece from each stage of your career would be fine. And if there are any others you want me to look at, that's fine, too."

He nodded again but his gaze was on some point off to my right, as though he were daydreaming or suddenly remembering something very pleasant, or perhaps getting a new idea for a holo. For a moment, I was uncertain as to whether it was any of those things but then I realized, and just as I did, it touched me.

It was a very light touch, a brush that might have been accidental. A

pathosfinder's mind isn't at all receptive to casual telepathy or an empath just cruising; it's all that self-definition and controlled concentration we engage in during the course of mindplay. After awhile, it becomes second-nature. It's going on all the time somewhere in your mind, an engine on idle. Madeleine brushed up against me and passed on, like someone who'd accidentally knocked on the wrong door and didn't wait for an answer. She was gone before I could sense how close she was.

Caverty sighed cheerfully and then looked down at his hands resting on his thighs. "It's just good to know she's there."

"I can't have that."

"Pardon?" He didn't look up.

"I can't have her coming in like that. Especially when we're hooked in together."

"Oh, she knows that. I asked her to look in on me, as it were. Just so I'd know she was there."

"You'll have to ask her not to do it."

"She knows that, too." His hands came together, gripping each other tightly and I realized she hadn't quite left yet. I let him be until he raised his head and I could see that the faraway look on his face was gone. "She understands, she really does. I know she does."

"Good. I'm glad. We can look at the next holo."

We looked at six more—a couple of display pieces normally presented on loop for continuous exhibition, a juvenile piece that had been badly received, and a thematic trilogy having to do with growing older. The juvenile piece was negligible in terms of his work as a whole—he no longer had any idea what it was like to be a child. The trilogy was interesting as a precursor of his present state; after viewing it, you might have thought he was having difficulty accepting the fact that he himself was growing older. But while he'd alluded to that earlier, I didn't think that was the bulk of his problem.

It was close to supper time when we finished, so I let him go, pleaded fatigue for myself and headed for my room so I could review/relive everything on boost.

The last thing I had expected her to do was to come to me. How could Caverty possibly cope with his Entourage without her somewhere in the room doing whatever it was she did—I still hadn't figured out exactly what her function was, but whatever it was, she was good at it.

She didn't even knock. Knocking wasn't customary in this house, apparently. I was taking a semi-meditative breather from boosted reviewing and she slipped into the room like a bit of cloth blown in by an errant draft.

"Hi," she said shyly, standing with her back against the door.

I gestured at one of the pudgy spot chairs. Not the closest one. She sank into it gingerly, keeping her hands on the sides of the cushions as though she might have to launch herself out of it on short notice.

"I know you must be wondering why I'm not at dinner," she said. "I don't always go. Sometimes I take a night off, eat in my room. But Caverty loves his public."

"Do you think a private Entourage qualifies as a 'public'?"

"In Caverty's case, yes, I think so. Public as opposed to the privacy of his mind."

I didn't feel like arguing it with her so I let it go.

"We live a very balanced life here. You may not think so but it is. Every element is carefully balanced against every other element. The Entourage population stabilized a little while ago and it provides Caverty with the security he needs to be able to work."

"But he isn't able to work."

"Well, no, not now but before he hit this rough patch in his creativity, he was able to work very well."

"You're the second person, I think, who's told me that the Entourage has 'stabilized'."

She nodded. "And?"

"I wouldn't call it stabilization."

"What, then?"

"I'd call it entropy."

She drew back slightly, as though I'd taken a swipe at her. "Or stagnation. I'm sorry if that hurts your feelings."

Mad-a-LAYNE laughed. "My feelings?"

"Or whomever's you've got."

Still smiling, she leaned forward. "I could have anybody's. Everybody's. You know us empath's. Especially those of us with a stronger telepathic bent than most."

I felt that brush against my mind again; she didn't persist.

"You're resistant, though. I guess most mindplayers are. All that holding yourself together that you do when you're in contact with someone else's mind. Holding your identity together. Holding tight to what you are. Isn't that the way they put it in mindplayer school, or wherever it is you go to learn how to handle those *machines*? Hold tight to what you are, am I right?"

I had the sensation of the room rearranging itself around us so that we were squared off against each other. Beside me, my system was assembled, the optic nerve connections capped but primed and ready for use.

"Am I right? Hold tight to what you are?"

"Generally the client isn't trying to get at what you are. So it isn't really

necessary to go around clenched like a fist.”

“Then why do you?”

“I’m sure it must seem that way to you, having such free access to all the people around here. But I’m really quite normal.”

“Normal in whose terms? Them, out there in the world, where you use that can-opener to break into people’s minds?”

I shook my head. “I think I’d better go.”

“What?” A look of panic, now. “Wait—why?”

Half out of my own chair, I paused. “*Why?* You must know.”

“No, I don’t. I *would* know if you didn’t shut me out.”

I saved my laugh for later, on the trip home. “It’s not the sort of thing you need empathic powers to know.”

“For me, it is.”

I started to disassemble the system. “He’s going to know. Caverty, I mean. He’ll know what’s happened between us just now and he won’t be able to work with me.”

She got up and came over to me, intending to put her hand on my arm; I stepped away from the system quickly. “Sorry,” she said, putting the hand behind her back. “I wasn’t thinking. I just wanted you to stop that. You mustn’t leave.”

“I don’t think there’s much choice any more.”

“I really didn’t mean to do this, to try to force you out of here. I was just—” She blew out a frustrated breath. “I’m sorry. I don’t even know how to begin to try to explain it to you, I’m so used to just letting people know how I feel. Especially when the feeling is so complex. Do you know how that is, to feel so many different things at one moment?” She paused. “Or is that not being properly *deadpan*?”

She wiped both hands over her face and through her hair, turning away from me. “So many misunderstandings because *words* get in the way. People unable to imagine how other people feel because you can’t explain to someone with just *words* a feeling of jealousy and gladness mixed up with the desire to see a loved one succeed.”

I refrained from pointing out that she just had. “Just because you don’t have emotional access to me doesn’t mean that I have no understanding. I don’t *have* to feel exactly what you feel to know what it is.” I shrugged. “In any case, I still have to leave.”

“No. Please don’t. Caverty would never forgive me.”

“Sure he would.”

She allowed herself a tremulous, momentary smile. “Yes, he would. But I don’t want to put him through the effort. I would never forgive *myself*, and the effect of that on Caverty would be horrible. I agreed to your conditions voluntarily, I urged Caverty to go along with them. If I sabotage everything,

Caverty won't have a chance."

"Of course he will," I said quietly, though I tended to doubt it.

She looked over at me sharply. "I meant he won't have a chance to find out whether this could have worked for him or not."

"Oh. Yes, that *is* different."

"You see? Another misunderstanding because of *words*. If you'd been open to me, you would have understood what I meant instantly."

I did not tell her I didn't see why that was necessarily a better arrangement than the usual conversational mode of imparting information, emotional or otherwise. Not to mention the fact that there wouldn't have been a misunderstanding had there been *enough* words. NN, I thought, was going to give me a medal for self-control when he reviewed my report.

"Anyway," she said, softening, "you mustn't leave. Please. I promise I won't interfere any more."

"It's not that," I said. "It's that Caverty's going to know what happened between us."

"You'd tell him?"

"No. But you would. You couldn't help yourself."

She drew herself up. "Yes, I can. I can hold as tight to my own as you can to yours. I can keep feelings from him or allow them out as I choose. And I promised not to touch him while you're working with him, so I won't even have to make the effort. I *will* keep from touching him. And you. I *will*." She paused. "Stay?"

I nodded, without words.

I could tell he'd slept well and it surprised me. I'd have thought the prospect of meeting me in his studio/sanctorum shortly after dawn without Mad-a-LAYNE would have kept him on the thin edge of wakefulness for most of the night. It must have been a terrific dinner for him, the whole Entourage love-bombing him with lots of acclaim and reassurance. Either that or Mad-a-LAYNE had been with him after all, in spite of her protests to me. As I worked at reassembling the system, I found myself hoping she had. I would hook in with Caverty, discover she'd lied, disconnect and go home. End of story.

The way I was wanting forever to get out of there, you'd have thought I'd have done just that, said to hell with it all and risked whatever NN's professional wrath would have brought. If anything. I'd turned down jobs before and NN hadn't sued me. I'd even cut some short and NN had seen the correctness of my action. But I'd never backed out of one and I just wasn't sure how the old bastard would take that. Of course, I hadn't wanted it in the first place but I'd allowed myself to be talked into it—my own fault, really. Which I guess was why I kept reassembling the system in Caverty's studio,

and primed the optic nerve connections and got him all settled and comfortable on a chaise and removed his beautiful biogem eyes and hooked him into a building-colors relaxation exercise. It had been my own idea to skip the real-time outside exercises. Somehow a round of *What Would You Do?* or *What Do You Hear In These Pictures?* just didn't seem right for him. There were a couple of others I might have tried with him, including *Finish the Following*, which NN himself had invented for visual artists, involving real-time completion of a partial image but no doubt that would have made him feel as though I were forcing his hand. As it were. Besides, I felt the more time he could spend getting accustomed to being inward without Mad-a-LAYNE, the easier it would be to work with him.

I had the system run continuous checks on his vitals while I prepared myself to meet him mind-to-mind. He showed no signs of panicking or disintegrating so I took my time. I had to; there were a lot of feelings to put away.

He'd been in the relaxation exercise for nearly half an hour before I felt prepared enough to remove my own eyes and slip them into solution and a little longer after I hooked myself up to the system before I allowed it to bring my consciousness and his together.

The contact was gradual. I chose a new color as a vehicle and slipped in among the others he had been forming. He sensed me immediately and accepted the contact just as quickly. The colors cleared out, leaving us in a visualization not of his studio but of the banquet hall where dinner was celebrated every night.

Well, he said, here we are.

Is this where you keep your holos?

No. It's where I keep myself. My self, I mean.

What do you do here?

He looked around and I looked with him. The room seemed pretty much as it was in real life, down to the buffet tables, except he had not visualized food on them. I saw the area where I had sat with the domestic actor the first night I'd been there; it too was empty. I was about to repeat my question when the room began to darken, first in the corners and then spreading out in waves of shadows.

This is what I do here, he said. I don't be alone here.

I don't be alone is an awkward verbalization of what it was and not quite what he said but that was the way I received it. Before I could get meaning around it, the shadows had formed themselves into images of the Entourage, ghostly and nowhere near as substantial as our own representations but somehow no less present. Immediately they were cluttering up everything, hanging all over us as though we were underwater with a lot of rags and scarves.

Come on now, I coaxed, holding my patience. You can clear them all out.

A ghost of the umbrella woman flowed over his face. *Yes, I can*, he said.

I waited and he waited to see what I was waiting for. I felt the warm brush of someone's presence and for a moment I was nose to nose with the woman who'd had a cage on her head. Admiration, envy, a sense of accomplishment...the emotions belonged to several different people. I brushed her away.

Caverty?

If I want to. That's what it is, you see. I can clear them all out if I want to. But I don't want to. I don't want to! I! DON'T! WANT! TO!

It was a mental blast that blew me into the center of the room. I flew through the ghosts, tasting a thousand different emotions in a second, the admiration, the desire to be close, the envy, the sorrow, the loneliness, the gladness, the fatigue of routine followed by the sense of security, the euphoria, the craving that is addiction and most of all the appeasement that came both from having received something and having had something taken, the sweet need of being increased, the even sweeter need of being diminished.

They meant to pin me but ghosts can't really do anything, not even mental ones. I spread them out easily, clearing an area around myself big enough to accommodate myself and Caverty's ego.

I know you don't want to, Caverty, I said, calling to him through the wraiths wrapping themselves around his face, *but if you're willing to join me here, you can and it won't be me forcing you to do anything. Understand?*

Understand, they all said, Caverty and all of them together. *Don't want to, though!*

Then that's it, I said. *We don't have anything more to do.*

Arlen The Bear floated over me with his big arms held out. *Are you sure about that?* he asked with Caverty's mental voice.

I pulled all the way into myself so they—he, Caverty, I reminded myself—so he wouldn't feel my anger for the time and effort wasted when he'd never intended to try working with me. For several mental moments, I was aware only of composing myself. When I came out of it to face Caverty again, he was much closer than before, almost intrusive. My alarm nearly showed; after eight years without any mindplaying, he shouldn't have had that much skill at creeping up on me. Time to go, I thought, threw myself out of the visualization into the relaxation exercise. Caverty followed me and the colors caught him like quicksand and held him.

Even so, the taste of his consciousness seemed slow to fade out of my own mind, as though he were still chasing me anyway. My problem, I thought; sometimes the most unlikely people can get a hook into you and it's hell to get out. When I got home, I'd have myself dry-cleaned. And at NN's

expense, not my own.

I disconnected from the system the moment it told me I could do so without trauma, groped for my eyes and couldn't contain the sigh of relief at finding them still in the container. I popped them back in and just sat for several minutes in Caverty's comfortable chair, rocking back and forth and breathing my way down to a calm state.

We were alone in the room. I hadn't expected us to be. I'd expected to come out and find them all there, waiting, wanting to—I forced the thought away before my heart rate could increase again.

Caverty lay on his chaise, completely relaxed. I had a strong urge to just leave him like that, limp and blind and harmless, and sneak out of the house and run all the way back to the agency. We hadn't even touched on ideas or holos or creativity or anything vaguely related. I hadn't even found any *memories*—just that damned Entourage, as present in his brain as it was outside of it.

Except for Mad-a-LAYNE, I realized. I hadn't felt her in there anywhere. As though she didn't exist.

I shook away my questions. Ask later; get out now. *Now*. But it was another minute before I could bring myself to touch Caverty even just to disconnect him from the system and put his eyes back in.

"Jesus," he said, sitting up slowly. He rubbed his forehead in a dazed way. "I didn't realize that—I didn't realize." He looked up at me pleadingly. "I don't know what to say to you."

I capped his connections and slipped them into a drawer in the system. "You don't have to say anything. I'll be going now."

"We aren't going to try again?"

"I don't think we can. Not until you do something about the general population in there."

He touched his forehead again. "They are all in there, aren't they?"

"Oh, yes."

"And I think if you hooked in with each of them, you'd find me in every single one."

"That's right."

"Madeleine?"

I nodded. "Prolonged empathy."

A slow smile spread across his face. "Sometimes I was afraid it hadn't worked. But Madeleine was right." His eyes narrowed. "And that's why you don't want to try again. Because I like it."

"Not the only reason, but that's part of it."

"And you *don't* like it."

I shrugged. "If you like it, it doesn't make much difference about me."

Without saying anything, he got up, stretched, and walked over to the

pile of unused holo equipment. I paused for a moment, watching him, and then capped the set of connections I'd used. "I'd appreciate it if Harmony or someone would call me a flyer." No response. He didn't even look at me. "As for your fee, my agency may give you a partial refund. Minus expenses and time spent in the system." Still no response. I couldn't even get a clear reading of his Emotional Index. Maybe he was thinking about what it meant to give up the art for the audience. I didn't know and I really didn't want to. I moved around to the other side of the system to run a three-second diagnostic before disassembling the components and turned my back to him. It was the dumbest thing I ever did.

Coming to from a state of unconsciousness when you're hooked into the system is like going from death to a dream. For awhile, you don't even know you're conscious and when you finally do realize it, the vertigo is furious. You fall in every direction at once, through every idea and thought you have. It seems like you'll fall forever and then you grab onto something, some concept, some belief, some identity thing, and you hold as tight as you can for a long time. And then, a mental century later, you feel steady enough to look around and see where you are and why and who else is there, if anyone.

I was back in the banquet room again, except this one was *my* banquet room, not the one in Caverty's mind, and there was no one there but me. At the moment. I could sense him nearby, though, waiting for me to tell him to come in.

I don't work that way, Caverty, I said and strode to the door. It was a big wooden antique with a shiny carved handle. *I'm coming out to you.*

I yanked at the handle. It wouldn't budge. Smoothing out the panic ripples, I stepped back from the door and gathered my strength into my hands, making them big, even bigger than Arlen The Bear's, and took hold of the handle again, intending to crush it. It swelled to fit my palms and even as I pressed on it, my hands were shrinking.

I jumped back, looking around for another way out.

Forget it, said the chandelier. Harmony. *You don't want to leave. You don't know what it's like to feel that way, to not want to leave. If you did, you'd feel differently.*

I didn't want to deal with that absurdity, nor did I want them to sense how trapped I felt. *All right,* I said, *standoff. I don't get out and you don't get in.*

Wrong.

Softer than a whisper; quieter than a brush against you in passing. She stood in the center of the empty room, very small. Delicate, even; a delicate vessel filled with so many feelings. She came toward me. I tried to back away but the floor shifted under me, keeping me in the same spot but still letting her approach.

They'll know how you feel and you'll know how they feel, she said gently. Cracks appeared in the wall behind her. *Without a word needing to be spoken*. Her arms reached for me.

Somehow, I managed to pull back a little. The cracks in the wall grew larger; faces showed through. Not ghosts this time.

We're all here now. We thought it could work, made contact with Caverty after you hooked in together, but we were wrong. Your concentration would allow only limited contact. We were all ghosts and I couldn't even appear. You didn't even recognize us as being present. So I made contact with Caverty and then we hooked you in with him. Much better. It's working now.

She did not quite have me, though; she couldn't quite reach through the layers of deadpan to my core.

Every relationship is something like this, she said, trying to pull me closer. *People feed on each other whether it's lover to lover, friend to friend, audience to artist. We consume, we are consumed. You couldn't live otherwise. We've just refined it, made it more efficient—more satisfying. You'll see. Dinner here is always an Event. Especially when we finally get something new in. A nice change, to have variety in the menu. It's been a long time since the last one.*

I struggled back a little more, gaining ground even though the cracks in the walls were opening wider. *The only problem is I'm not willing.*

And as soon as I said it, I knew *that* was the dumbest thing I'd ever done. Admitting to it, admitting to anything at all gave her the lever she needed to pry off the last of Deadpan, leaving naked Allie.

The walls, as they say, came tumbling down while Mad-a-LAYNE lowered me to the floor. They swelled around her, blocking out the light with their faces.

Unwillingness, she said, face close to mine, *is a feeling. We know how you feel.*

And they did, every single one of them, while she directed traffic. Caverty. Harmony. Arlen The Bear, the chubby man, the domestic drama guy. The Nordic blonde in the kimono. The umbrella woman, the chicken people. Even Priscilla. Even Priscilla. Over and over again. Over and over and over.

<<BREAK>>

Maybe it went on for days. Maybe only hours. When Mad-a-LAYNE disconnected me, I was asleep. In Caverty's studio. They were all gone. Sleeping it off themselves. I staggered around and when my vision cleared, I figured out how to pack my system up.

They should have caught me going down the stairs with it. Priscilla the

cop, you know. I got to the bottom of the stairs and that Compass and I thought I was caught because someone came out from behind the staircase. I didn't recognize the face but I remembered the style of dress and the manner. Employee. That's when I found out I couldn't talk, right then, because I was going to beg for mercy and nothing came out. Like the record skipped the groove. You remember records. He didn't say anything, either. He just took one look at me and went over to the panel near the front door and pressed a button. I was too fried to run for it so I just waited for them all to come swooping down on me but the house stayed quiet. A little later—I don't know how little, my sense of time was still gone—I heard the flyer land outside. Completely automated, no pilot. I looked through the navigator program and found a picture of a place I liked. Not telling you what it looked like. I just punched for it and off I went and here I am and that's about all.

Yah, so maybe they meant to let me go? Could be. Maybe they figured I'd be too disoriented to turn up anywhere. I guess maybe they didn't want to keep me because they'd *stabilized*, you see. They were all so proud of having *stabilized*, they didn't need a new item on the menu permanently. Just for a change of pace.

Yah, so. I could let you find me and you could get them, right. I mean, this is big-time mindcrime here.

So you go ahead and go get them.

But you're not getting me.

It's peaceful now. I won't ever have to hook in with anyone again or talk, ever. I like that idea. It appeals to my basic deadpan nature, see. I don't want to know how anyone feels any more. And I don't want anyone knowing how I feel, either. Caverty's Entourage, they're not the only ones who feed off each other's emotions. Everybody does it, even just a little bit. I'm not taking any chances any more. Nobody else is going to feed off me. They all know how I feel and that's enough.

That's enough.

<<FINAL BREAK>>

Clang-clang. Clang-clang.

▼

i n t r o d u c t i o n t o
SECOND COMINGS—REASONABLE RATES

In the lost days of my youth, I went to a few weddings. All of them were great overblown affairs thrown by families so horrified to find they were to be related that they had to take their feelings out on caterers and florists or run the risk of killing each other. I also went to a few funerals. This caused me to state, with the certainty of youth, that I would die before I got married and, of course, I was young enough to be mistaken.

*This was my second professional sale and you will find in here a couple by the interesting surname "Swanwick." Completely coincidental, I assure you. I sold it to Ed Ferman at F&SF before *New Dimensions 11*, edited by Marta Randall and Robert Silverberg, came out, which had Michael's debut story in it as well as my own. Through our mutual friend, Gardner Dozois, who knew both of us before we knew each other, I was able to assure Michael that it was pure chance and he was a good sport about it.*

I don't think everyone believed it was a chance thing. The late Terry Carr bought this story for his best of the year anthology and put it right next to one of Michael's. That Terry; what a kidder.

▼

SECOND COMINGS— REASONABLE RATES

◀ **H**umphrey hated funerals. Hated them. *Hated* them.

He slipped the bright purple tunic over his head, wound a belt around his waist and yanked it tight. It cut into his skin sharply, but he left it that way. If he was going to do something he didn't like, he might as well be uncomfortable. The intercom in the wall chimed.

"Almost ready, Hum?" asked his brother-in-law's voice.

"Just about. Gotta comb my hair." He could hear his wife speaking indistinctly in the background. "Tell Rita I'll be down directly." He put on his shoes and went into the bathroom.

"Funerals are sick. I hate them," he whispered to his reflection in the full wall mirror as he brushed his shoulder-length black hair into a semblance of order. Stepping back to survey his appearance, he frowned even more sourly. The tie-belt made him look like a sack of something unpleasantly lumpy, and there was a stain on one knee of his white pants. Rita would be too distraught to notice, but his brother-in-law would. He shrugged. Daniel's disapproval was something he could live with. Stabbing the light button off, he went down to the living room.

Rita was holding a handkerchief over her mouth and nose as she rocked gently in the waterchair. Daniel's wife Aleene stood nearby as though she were a servant waiting for instructions, while Daniel himself paced back and forth in front of the door, flipping his credit card nervously. Aleene bent over and touched Rita's shoulder. "Hum's ready, dear. We can go now."

Steeling himself, Humphrey walked over to her and helped her to her feet. She looked up at him, red-eyed, tears still rolling down her cheeks.

“Do you want a BeCalm?” he asked lamely.

With a sob, she flung herself into his arms, crying a large wet spot into his shoulder. He held her awkwardly, patting her hair. Aleene watched, shaking her head sadly. Daniel cleared his throat.

“We really should go,” he said apologetically. “If we wait any longer, they’ll have to hold up the service. Mom will be very upset.”

Humphrey nodded, hoping he didn’t look as revolted as he felt. His wife’s brother didn’t look like someone who had just lost his father. Rita, on the other hand, was crying harder than ever, twisting the soft cloth of his tunic in her fists.

“She’s getting hysterical. Get her a sedative,” he told Aleene.

“But—”

God, how he hated funerals. *Hated* them! “Just get her one or we’ll never be able to get her into the car.”

“What about afterwards?”

“Bring along a counteractive. A *mild* one. Too much excitement will be bad for her.”

Between the two of them, they managed to get the pill down her while Daniel looked on, all but tapping his foot. It was five minutes before the pill took effect, and another five before they could put her in the car.

“Name?” asked the car.

“Daniel Greyson,” said Daniel, slipping his credit card into the slot on top of the dashboard.

“Scanning,” the car said and chimed softly. “Please look into the binocular eyepiece located just in front of you.” Daniel leaned forward and did so to let the car check his retina pattern. “Affirmative. Destination, please.”

“Allardyce Non-Specific Religious Temple and Crematorium.”

The car lifted soundlessly and began circling in preparation for entering the air traffic. Humphrey stared distractedly out the window, fidgeting with a strap of the shoulder harness. Below, rows and rows of houses diminished to the size of dice, freckling a landscape divided regularly by narrow roadways for pedestrians and the few necessary ground vehicles.

He twisted around to look at his wife. She was lying down in the back seat with her head pillowed on Aleene’s slender thighs. “Make her sit up and strap in,” he said irritably. “That isn’t safe.”

“She’s asleep. Besides, what can it hurt this one time? We’re not out joyriding, we’re going to a funeral. Anyway, you were the one who made her take the BeCalm. It blanked her right out.”

Humphrey suppressed a sigh and looked at his brother-in-law. Daniel was staring straight ahead with his arms folded over his chest. He seemed put-upon.

"How far away is the temple?" he asked.

Daniel didn't look at him. "About twenty minutes, if we don't hit any heavy traffic. That's why I wanted to get started before this. We could get caught in a holding pattern for I don't know how long. Mom will be down there by herself—" His voice started to shake a little.

"Won't Veronica be there?"

Daniel laughed bitterly. "Oh, undoubtedly. And she'll probably be good and drunk, too. Poor Mom. I don't know why they put up with her all these years, they sacrificed to give her—to keep her—and she'll be making a spectacle of herself—" He took a deep breath. "Bitch. I'd have her barred if I could."

"Daniel!" Aleene was shocked. "Your own sister. I'm just glad Rita isn't awake."

"It's Rita I'm thinking of as well as Mom. How do you think it's going to be for her to see Veronica like that at a time like this? Rita was always Poppa's favorite," he added to Humphrey. "We all knew it, but it didn't matter. He was such a grand old guy. He loved us all—" Daniel fished a handkerchief out of the pouch on his belt and blew his nose. Aleene reached out awkwardly to touch his shoulder, trying not to disturb Rita, who had begun to snore.

"It's okay, Danny boy," she said softly. "It's okay to cry for Poppa. I loved him, too. I know."

Daniel broke down completely. Aleene began sniffing sympathetically. Rita continued to snore. Humphrey rested his head against the door window and closed his eyes. Funerals were horrible. He hated them, hated them, *hated* them.

A policeman strapped to a flying platform was directing air traffic over the temple; otherwise, they might have been caught in a holding pattern indefinitely. Humphrey peered down at the cars stacked triple and quadruple on top of each other. Parking attendants on platforms smaller than the policeman's were guiding the cars coming in, cutting dizzying paths through the air, lighting and taking off like insects.

"God," breathed Humphrey. "How many people are coming to this?"

"It's a big family," Daniel said nasally. He had managed to bring himself under control. In the back seat, Rita was semiconscious and stirring a little, but still prone and spilling tears into Aleene's lap.

"I'm sure a lot of Poppa's friends are here, too," said Aleene. "Poppa has miles of friends."

The car descended, following electronic signals from one of the parking attendants, who guided them to a clear patch of ground marked with a large white X. Daniel rolled down his window. "Do I leave the car here?"

"Yeah, I park it for you. Leave your card in. Mine goes next to it. It's an authorized temple card." She held it up for Daniel's inspection.

"All right. Give us a minute. We're the immediate family, and one of us is sedated."

"Take your time, sir. The service has been delayed because of the large volume of traffic, anyway."

"Poor Mom," Daniel muttered as he got out of the car. Humphrey was already out and trying to pull Rita's limp form from the back seat. Eyes closed, she allowed herself to be pulled forward and then slumped over the folded-down front seat.

"Maybe we should have rented a four-door," said Aleene, her hands fluttering helplessly. Humphrey pinched his wife's cheek several times.

"Come alive, now, honey. We have to get out of the car."

"Where are we?" she sighed wearily.

"We're at the temple. Come on."

"Poppa!" she wailed and slid onto the floor in an untidy heap. Daniel hurried around to help Humphrey extricate her. They got her standing unsteadily between them with her arms around their shoulders and their arms twined about her waist.

"Let's walk her some," said Humphrey. "Fresh air might rouse her a little."

"We're going to look like hell entering with her in this condition," Aleene said primly. She still hadn't forgiven Humphrey for sedating her.

"Would you rather we brought her in screaming like a psycho?" he snapped as he and Daniel struggled to keep the sagging woman upright.

"She can't help it. She's never had anyone die in the family before. She was only a baby when—"

"That's enough," Daniel barked, surprising them all, including himself. "We've got plenty to be concerned about without you two going for each other's throats. He's my father, too, you know."

"I'm sorry, Danny boy, I was just—well, never mind." She glowered briefly at Humphrey before she controlled her expression long enough to give him a cold little apology. Humphrey didn't reply. His wife seemed to be waking up, but reluctantly, fighting it. Maybe the BeCalm had been a mistake, but he wasn't about to admit it to Aleene.

When they reached the front steps of the temple, an usher waiting at the open door rushed down, offering to take Rita. Daniel waved him off. "Aleene, see if you can comb her hair any and wipe off some of that smeared make-up."

Startled, Aleene looked down at herself. "Oh, God, it's all over my pants!" She groaned, but made an attempt to arrange her sister-in-law's mashed and flattened hairdo. "Maybe if I put my scarf over her head—"

"Never mind. Wipe her face and we'll go in."

"Wipe her face with what?"

"With your *scarf*," growled Humphrey, snatching it from around her neck and doing it himself. He gave it back to her ruined with mascara, and he could see her toting up the cost of the scarf and pants. No doubt she'd send him a bill.

"Are we ready now?" asked Daniel impatiently.

"Are we ever." Humphrey avoided looking at Aleene as they half dragged Rita up the steps.

The temple was filled almost to capacity. Under the soft synthesized music, whispers rustled like papers in a wind as they went slowly down the center aisle to the front pew. Rita's mother Adelle stood up when she saw them, relief washing over her face like a storm. She embraced each of them with a fluttery little moan. Over her shoulder, Humphrey saw Veronica Greyson, dressed shockingly in black from head to foot, sprawled lazily in the pew with her ankles crossed on the kneeler.

"Oh, God, Veronica *is* drunk," whispered Aleene to no one. "How *could* she?"

Humphrey was tempted to tell her. He could have used a drink himself, or at least a BeCalm.

There was a shuffle of people, a flurry of whispered directions, and he found himself in the pew behind them, next to a middle-aged couple who introduced themselves as the Swanwicks. Humphrey nodded and told them who he was, feeling mildly annoyed at their approving murmurs. Veronica had moved so that she was directly in front of him, and she was twisted around regarding him through half-closed, bloodshot eyes. Humphrey could see she was drunker than usual. She wore a thick layer of pale make-up that made the rough on her cheeks stand out like clown paint. Her eyes were thickly lined in black and fringed with a veritable forest of false eyelashes.

Hi, she mouthed at him.

Hi, he mouthed back.

She beckoned him with a black-gloved hand; he bent forward obligingly as the Swanwicks bristled.

"I hate these fucking *things*," she whispered hoarsely, and Humphrey realized the redness in her eyes wasn't totally due to heavy drinking. She had been crying. He patted her arm reassuringly.

"It'll all be over soon."

She swung her head from side to side, her loose brown hair falling in her face. "It's never gonna be over. Never, never, never."

Daniel reached behind Rita and Adelle Greyson and tapped her head warningly. She jabbed her black middle finger at him but turned around to slouch down in her seat.

Humphrey sat back, pushing his tight belt lower. A small roll of fat hung

over it and he folded his arms to hide it. Veronica had really done it this time, he thought grimly. Black at a funeral—she might as well have stood up and shouted her feelings to the entire congregation. Even the Swanwicks, stodgy as they seemed, were bright in greens and yellows.

“Too bad,” whispered Mr. Swanwick.

“Isn’t it?” Humphrey answered vaguely, unsure of what the man meant. Rita was groping behind her mother for his attention. He gave her his hand automatically, surprised at the vigorous squeeze she gave it.

“Sit with me,” she begged.

“Honey, there isn’t room for all of us. I’ll be right here.”

She looked pained, her tongue flicking around her mouth as though she were thirsty. He felt a surge of anger. That damned Aleene must have given her a counter and then a stimulant besides. He’d strangle her with her own scarf.

“Hum, what’s wrong? Why are you frowning?”

Not ten minutes before she’d been weeping and wailing, barely able to stand up. He wanted to tear his hair in frustration. “Nothing, Rita. It’s all right. They’re going to start any moment now. I’m right here if you need me.” He knew she wouldn’t.

She turned around reluctantly, saying, “Okay. Okay. Okay,” as though it were a chant.

Mrs. Swanwick was beaming at him. “How long have you been married?” she asked him sweetly.

“Two years next month.”

“Lovely. Just lovely.”

He managed a weak grin. He hated, hated, *hated* funerals.

“Too bad,” Mr. Swanwick said again.

“Pardon?”

Mr. Swanwick jerked his chin at Veronica. “The things they’ve put up. Gerald and Adelle. Gerald is my cousin, and I’ve never understood why he keeps trying with—” he jerked his chin at Veronica’s back again. “Totally unnecessary. She—”

The soft organ music became a flourish of trumpets and the entrance of the minister and her two acolytes marked the beginning of the service. Humphrey stood up with everyone else, listening through a hymn he didn’t know as the celebrants took their places on the altar steps above the flower-draped coffin. Under the spotlights, their white robes seemed to glow phosphorescently. At the end of the hymn, the minister offered an elaborate blessing, and the spotlights changed to pink. Humphrey restrained himself and didn’t groan. He half expected a song-and-dance team to come out next.

The congregation sat down on a cue from the minister he didn’t get and he was left momentarily standing alone. Embarrassed, he sat down quickly and stared at his lap, too mortified to listen to the service. It must have been

very nice; both the Swanwicks were sniffing, as were most of the people in the temple. It sounded, he thought sourly, like a convention of the last hay fever incurables. Veronica was not sniffing, he noticed. She was bent forward with her elbows on her knees, shaking a little. His wife, by contrast, was sitting up stiffly, as though she were having trouble keeping from jumping up. He wondered what Aleene had given her.

The synthesized music, which had died down to an undertone of accompaniment, was beginning to swell in imitation of a gigantic pipe organ, but with trills and embellishments no organ could ever have given it. He looked up at the altar. The minister had acquired a cordless microphone and was winding up for a big finish. The spotlights were writhing through a spectrum of colors. Funerals, he thought sourly.

"The hand of God has touched our Gerald Greyson and called him from our midst," intoned the minister, with feeling. "But the goodness that is the essence of Gerald Greyson—that will always be with us!"

The spotlights went blindingly to white as the casket sank slowly into the floor. As the flowers disappeared, the lights went out and then snapped on again, focused on some curtains to the immediate right of the altar. Humphrey rubbed his forehead tiredly. The organ music was nearly unbearable, the vibrations penetrating bone-deep. In spite of himself, he felt the desired sensation: anticipation.

At the height of the earth-shaking crescendo, a man stepped through the curtains. He was tall, grey-haired, with a trim little mustache and beard, wearing white robes identical to the minister's. He smiled at the congregation and held out his arms.

"Poppa!" screamed Rita. She fought her way out of the pew, ran up to the altar and threw herself into the man's arms. Adelle Greyson and Daniel followed, Aleene trailing them and turning around to look at Humphrey, indicating he should go up, too. He sighed and stood up, touching Veronica's shoulder tactfully. She shrugged away from him.

"That isn't my father," she said huskily. "My father's dead."

He went up to the altar to take his place for the wedding ceremony that would reunite the Greysons, so recently parted by death.

The reception, held next door at a temple annex, was a large, noisy, crowded affair. Adelle and Gerald Greyson sat at the head table with Daniel, Rita, and Aleene in the place of the prodigal Veronica. Humphrey found himself seated at a table with four women and three men he'd never seen before, wondered briefly why he wasn't sitting with the Greysons and decided he was better off. He looked around for Veronica, who would have been conspicuous in her black outfit, but she didn't seem to be there. At the next table, the Swanwicks thought he was looking for them and kept waving

to him, calling, "Here we are!" to which he would reply, each time, "There you are!"

The meal kept him busy. He couldn't count the number of courses served nor could he seem to empty his wineglass. Every other minute, the room toasted the Greysons, who toasted each other and then toasted the room, while waiters (in a departure from the usual servant mechanisms) rushed to fill everyone's glass before the level in each went down below the halfway mark. Eventually he was in worse shape than Veronica had been in, unable to do much more than hunker over his plate and wonder what was on it. Electronic music began to play a medley of the latest holo hits, adding to the pandemonium.

"...look lifelike?" asked the woman next to him, dipping her sleeve in his wine-glass accidentally. He removed it, squeezed the wine out and picked up the glass.

"Pardon?" he asked, having a sip of wine.

"I said, doesn't old Gerry look lifelike?"

Humphrey twisted around to look at him. Old Gerry was on his feet, giving a speech no one could hear but everyone was applauding anyway.

"Yes," someone else answered for him. "It's amazing what they can do, isn't it?"

"I'd swear it was him," said the woman. "Looks like him, sounds like him, acts like him."

"I don't understand how they do it," said another woman, almost with disapproval.

Gerald Greyson was leading his wife out into the middle of the floor as "Anniversary Waltz," for no discernible reason, flowed out of the speakers in the ceiling, liquid with ersatz violins.

"Technology," said the first woman vaguely.

"Well, I know that, but how can they make them so they can eat and drink and—and so on?"

"Haven't you ever seen those antique dolls? My grandmother had one, we found it in the attic, cleaned it up, and you wouldn't believe what we sold it for."

"Probably not."

"Well, those old dolls could drink water, cry real tears, and wet. Of course, that's all they could do. These days—well, look at old Gerry!"

Old Gerry was now dancing with a beaming Rita. Mrs. Greyson was partnered with Daniel. Several other couples were rising to join them.

"You know," the woman went on, "I told my daughter she ought to get something like that instead of having a baby. Less trouble." Everyone laughed.

Humphrey turned around to look at her. She was staring past him,

smiling and craning her neck to get a glimpse of Gerald Greyson.

"I heard that Rita, the daughter he's dancing with now, took it so badly they had to dope her up," said the second woman. Or was it a third woman? Humphrey put his elbows on the table and propped up his chin in his hands.

"Didn't she *know*? It's been, what, ten years?"

"Closer to fifteen, I think, before they were on the open market. Well, of course, she must have known, but I guess it was still a blow for her. My ex and I used to party-hop with the Greysons, and it was no secret Rita was his favorite. Then, too, she was only a baby when Daniel died."

Humphrey frowned woosily, not sure that he had heard right.

"Oh, come on," said a man. "You aren't saying—"

"That's what I'm saying. Daniel was eight. He hit his head in, of all places, the bathtub and drowned."

"Look, I know they can make them do a lot of things, but they can't make them grow."

"No. The Greysons just traded up for a bigger model every few years."

"That's impossible," Humphrey heard himself saying, as if from very far away. "His wife—"

"His wife is one lucky woman, friend." All the women giggled.

"I'll bet she is," said one of the men.

"Can he cry real tears?" Humphrey asked of no one. "And wet?"

"Who is that?" he heard someone ask.

"I saw him talking to Veronica in church, some friend of hers, I guess."

"No, he came in with Rita and the others."

"He's Rita's husband, nit, don't talk so loud."

"Oh." Everyone shut up.

Humphrey sighed and stood up. "Guess I'm not going to hear anything interesting at this table," he said and walked unsteadily into the crowd of dancers, thinking that he had seen an exit on the other side of the room. Suddenly, he wanted fresh air very much.

Rita seemed to materialize in his arms, laughing and talking excitedly. "Hum! Hum! Here's Poppa! Look! Here's Poppa! It's so wonderful, Hum, he's back, I knew he wasn't dead, I just knew it!"

Humphrey frowned, opened his mouth to correct her, realized it would be bad form with her father's replacement standing right there and shut up again. Gerald Greyson was pumping his hand in a familiar grip, and he saw how Rita would be confused by it. It really did look and feel like her father.

"Good to see you here," Greyson said. "Are you having a good time?"

Humphrey blinked.

"Rita, I think you've been neglecting your husband." He tried to push them together. "Why don't you two—"

"No, thanks, but why don't *you* two keep on dancing? I've just got to

have some air. Have to get out. Side. Outside. Stuffy.” He fanned himself with one hand and then shouldered his way past them.

“...not electronics, exactly, but biochemicals,” someone crooned almost in his ear. “And electricity. Or something like that.”

“And it works?”

Humphrey turned around and found a couple deep in conversation as they danced, nearly rubbing up against him without noticing him.

“Marvelously. You know Ted and George Simons? Can you guess which one of them is—”

Humphrey fled, looking over people’s heads for any sign of a door leading out. People bumped into him, stepped on his feet, elbowed his ribs. He might have been invisible.

“When you die, Ed, I think I’ll just have you stuffed.”

“You’re awful.”

“No, you’re awful.”

“You’re all awful,” muttered Humphrey, and spotted a door marked PATIO. He struggled against the current of dancers, trying to make his way toward it.

“...Jody died, I just let them take over. We had advance arrangements. They’re so reasonable, too, I was surprised.”

“...hated to break up a good foursome, so they used their own money and replaced *her*, too, and they weren’t even related. Now the four of them...”

“...came home from school and asked me was the President dead. What could I say? I didn’t know, I told him to ask...”

“...last year. You didn’t know? Good Lord, I was fifty-four. A heart attack. Terrible shame if I do say so myself...”

He reached the door and fell through it, gasping with relief. It swung to behind him, cutting off the music and voices. Grimacing, he undid the knot of his belt and let it fall. He rubbed his sagging stomach and immediately felt better. The air was surprisingly cool for a late afternoon in midsummer, and he took great, deep breaths of it as though he had just emerged from underwater.

“Care to join me?”

He looked around. Veronica was reclining on a chaise lounge with a bottle of vodka. He shuffled over and sat down by her feet. “Wondered where you were.”

“Been in this bottle.” She held it up; it was three-quarters empty. “Want a hit?”

He shook his head. She shrugged, tilted it up and drank deeply.

“Uh-huh.” She smacked her lips. “Enjoy the funeral?”

“I hate funerals.”

“Yeah? How many you been to?”

"Three, four. Friends of our family. Both my parents are still alive." He shuddered. "I suppose some day—"

"Do you know," asked Veronica, "Daniel is dead?"

"I didn't, until a few minutes ago."

"Had to grow up with that *thing* in the house. Now Mom has another *thing*. They said treat it like your brother. Be goddamned if *I* would. Rita was only two. She didn't care."

"Aleene married it. Him." He still couldn't believe it.

"That's a ballbuster, ain't it? Plenty of live men, she marries a *thing*."

"Is it legal?"

"Mom just married a *thing*."

"Yes, but she was already married to him. Sort of."

"Well, it isn't *illegal*. A lot of people prefer *things* to other people."

"Less trouble," Humphrey said, echoing the woman at the table.

"Damn right on. They eat, sleep, make love—I'd sooner do it with a 'lectric cord. A live 'lectric cord. Anything. But it screws on command. You don't bother it, it won't bother you. That's what I call perfection. Build a better screwing machine, and the world will beat a path to your door." She tilted the bottle up again. "When Mom goes, that's the end. I'm through with all of them. There'll be two *things* living in a house together. For Rita's benefit. Daniel, as you know, has already attained *thingship*. Three *things*, one live idiot woman, 'scuse me, she's my sister and I know what she is, and one disgusting drunk, and that's what *I* am." She leered at him suddenly. "Hey, baby, whaddaya say we run off together?"

Humphrey's mouth dropped open. "Ah...why?" he laughed nervously.

"We may be the only two live people left around here in the not-too-distant future. Hell, we may be the only two live people now. Rita doesn't count."

He was aware of feeling like he should say something in Rita's defense, but his mind was still foggy, and there was something else he was curious about. "I don't understand why they never told me about Daniel."

"Why should they? If you're happy with a syntho-heart, or a glass eye, or a dildo, why mention it?" Veronica looked troubled. "I'm not drunk enough. Why aren't I drunk enough?"

Humphrey thought of asking her why she didn't tell him and changed his mind. It didn't matter. He stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"Back inside. I ought to check on Rita. Aleene gave her a stimulant and it's made her awfully hyper."

"That means you're not running off with me, I take it?"

He laughed again, weakly.

"Same to you, buddy." She toasted him with the bottle before killing it

and flinging it away. It landed with a nerve-jangling crash. "Olé!"

Humphrey turned away from her and walked back to the door to the reception hall. Just as he put his hand on the knob, Rita and her father spilled through it and took hold of his arms.

"Darling, are you all right?" Rita ran her hand through his hair and felt his face concernedly.

"Fine. Just needed some air." He tried to pull away.

"You looked pretty woozy," said Greyson.

"Too much to drink."

"Ah. Rita, see about getting this fine husband of yours a glass of water."

She nodded and hurried away, leaving them alone together. Humphrey suddenly felt very awkward, unsure of what to do or say. What could he say to this *thing*—father-in-law, he corrected himself. Father-in-law, in spirit. Sort of.

"I've been talking to Veronica," he said, glancing back to the chaise lounge. It was empty, Veronica nowhere in sight.

"Poor dear. Someday, we'll get through to her," Greyson said serenely. "Then we can put her troubled soul to rest."

Humphrey frowned in puzzlement. "Put her troubled soul to rest?" It didn't make any sense at first. And then, it did, horribly.

"She killed herself when she was twenty-one, already a hopeless alcoholic. That was ten years ago. My wife felt such profound failure as a mother that we chose to have her reproduced and replaced as she was, without the knowledge that she'd died, of course. Adelle refuses to give it up. *It has* gotten expensive—every so often, somebody slips up and she finds out she's dead. Then she shuts herself off, and we have to replace her again. But no parent wants to be left feeling that a child has been let down. So we endure the scenes, the embarrassments, the occasional disgrace or scandal. Just so we can keep trying to help her. I remember the beautiful child that she was, and I think, someday—well." He smiled at Humphrey, who began to feel dizzy.

"Don't you ever get the feeling that it's, ah, hopeless?" he asked after several moments had passed.

"Where there's life, there's hope, eh, Hum?" Greyson clapped him on the shoulder. "Let's go see what's become of your ice water. That Rita."

Humphrey allowed himself to be pulled back into the reception, back into the place where he could not tell the live people from the replacements, where there would be no need for him to grow or change or do anything, really at all. After a little more wine, it didn't make any difference anyway.

introduction to
THE SORCERESS IN SPITE OF HERSELF

We were leaving the house one day when my son stopped me. "We can't go yet, Mommy," Bob said solemnly. "We haven't searched for your car keys." It so happened that my system was working that day and we actually didn't have to search for my car keys, or my purse, or my sunglasses, or my gloves, or any of the many other things I can too easily lose track of without my very rigid placement system.

It's not my fault. I spent my own childhood helping my mother look for her keys. We're cursed, I tell you; cursed.

THE SORCERESS IN SPITE OF HERSELF

Lh, damn it, *please* be here,” she muttered for the millionth time, yanking open the top drawer of her bureau and pawing through the mess of lingerie inside. Her frantic fingers brushed a small green box and she flicked the lid open with her thumb. It was empty. She stared at it for several seconds, trying to remember what had been in it originally—the silver leaf brooch or the butterfly pin? She shook her head, putting the box on the cluttered dresser top. It was an old box, and she probably hadn’t put any jewelry in it for ages. She continued searching the drawer.

“Lou?”

She jumped, making a small shriek and inadvertently tossing several pairs of panties into the air. In the mirror she saw Tony standing in the doorway of the bedroom, looking amused. She hoped he couldn’t see the stricken expression in her own reflection at that distance. If she could get through the evening without his finding out, maybe she could get to a jeweler tomorrow and buy replacements. It would put her in hock up to her ears, which was as good a level as any, considering, but since they had separate bank accounts, it wouldn’t be hard to conceal the expenditure from him. She’d done that often enough in the past.

“I realize turning thirty is traumatic,” he said with gentle sarcasm, “but if you don’t put a move on, we’re going to be unforgivably late for your birthday dinner. They’ll give our reservations away.”

“Oh, yeah. Right.” She looked down at the open drawer and then at the scatter of items on the bureau top. There was no use in continuing her search. This was the fourth time she’d ransacked the dresser, and if they weren’t

there the first three times, they weren't about to appear now. Besides, if she delayed any longer, Tony was going to be suspicious. She pushed the drawer closed, plucked her purse out of the mess on the bureau, and forced a bright smile as she turned around. "Well, then, let's go."

Tony shook his head. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

A cold knot gathered in Lou's stomach. "Ah, am I?"

Tony tapped his left earlobe. "I thought you wanted to show off tonight."

"Oh. Well." She shrugged, trying to look natural. "You know, I was reading the paper and there was this news story about a woman who was wearing some ruby earrings and a guy walked right up to her on the street and just ripped them right out of her ears. Tore her earlobes to shreds. She had to go to the hospital and everything." Lou shuddered. "It kind of scared me, you know? I mean, I'm thinking about not even taking a purse tonight."

She could tell he didn't buy the explanation by the stunned look on his face. "Oh, Lou, you didn't—"

"They're safe, honest, Tone, I put them away—"

"—didn't *really* lose them—"

"—in the box where I always—"

"—*please* tell me you didn't lose the diamond earrings that cost me half a year's savings—"

"—for Chrissakes, they're in the drawer now. Let's go! We're going to be *late*!"

They stared across the room at each other in the sudden silence.

"Oh, God, Lou," Tony said finally.

Lou burst into tears. That was a dead giveaway. She knew it as soon as she did it, but she couldn't control herself. She was a crier under pressure, and she could no more break herself of that than she could break herself of losing things. Sobbing as much over her lack of control as with sorrow for Tony's discovery of the loss, she groped her way to the bed and sat down.

Tony stood helplessly in the doorway for a few moments and then went to her. "Lou, Lou, Lou," he chanted, pulling her into his arms. The comforting sound he was trying to put into his voice was not quite there. She sobbed harder.

"Come on, now," he said after a minute. "Pull yourself together, and I'll help you look for them."

"It's no use, Tony," she wept, pushing him away. She went to the bureau and slid a tangle of necklaces off a box of tissues. Before taking one, she felt around the inside of the box, but it contained nothing but tissues. "They're gone for good. I looked everywhere and they're not in the house."

"Did you ever take them off at work?"

She wagged her head from side to side. "I never wore them to work. Diamonds in the office would be a little much." She blew her nose.

"Are you *sure*?"

"Yes, I'm *sure*!" she snapped. "I'm not a complete feeb, you know!"

Tony stood up and folded his arms. "Don't get mad at *me*. I'm not the one who lost your earrings."

"No? I'm not so sure about that." She lifted her head, her tears drying up almost instantly. "You're always cleaning things up and putting things away where I can't find them. Maybe you saw my earrings lying around and decided to put them in a safe place. Only it's so safe that it's even safe from me!"

Tony's face hardened. "Look you, you can't just leave diamond earrings *lying around*. And someone's got to pick up the clutter around here. If I didn't, we'd be ass-deep in junk and you know it!"

Lou's shoulders slumped and she leaned on the bureau. "Oh, God, Tony. My *earrings*."

He took a deep breath. "When did you see them last?"

"I don't know," she said sadly, staring at the floor.

"Try to remember. Did you wear them last weekend?"

"I don't know."

"Well, when was the last time you wore them that you *can* remember?"

She made a pained face. "I think I wore them to the company dinner. In fact, I *know* I did, because Jack Waverly said something about them."

"Okay. Then what? After we came home, what did you do?"

"How should I know? That was a week and a half ago."

"*Think*."

"I must have put them where I always put them—on top of the bureau. In my jewelry box."

He got up and looked at the jumble of necklaces, pins, and other earrings in the shallow open box. "Are you sure they're not in there hiding under something?"

"I looked a million times, Tone."

"Goddamit, I don't see how you can find anything in that mess." He snatched the box off the bureau and upended it over the bed.

"Jesus, Tony, now you've made a bigger mess."

He spread the jewelry around, combing through it with his fingers. She stood and watched, waiting for him to give up. It was a scene they had replayed over and over through six months of marriage, with car keys, house keys, wallets, rings, eyeglasses, and a multitude of other things, usually hers, being the objects of the search. Long ago he had learned not to give her anything of his to hold, not even for a moment, because she would make it disappear. That was her special talent, making things disappear. Mostly they were small but important items, though she had, in the past, worked miracles with a ten-pound bag of charcoal briquets, a twenty-five pound frozen turkey

and once, in an unparalleled feat of dematerialization, a full barrel of trash. She insisted even to herself that the barrel had been stolen on collection day. If that indeed had been the case, however, someone had stolen the trash in it as well, because Tony had discovered the loss before the collection truck arrived.

Now Tony picked up the jewelry box and shook it vigorously over the bed again to dislodge anything that might have been jammed in there. Lou shook her head. He knew as well as she did that the box was empty. He dropped it on the bed and threw up his hands.

"How do you *do* it?"

She stared at his incredulous face, feeling like a monster.

"How do you make things disappear like that? Tell me. Tell me and I'll die a happy man!"

"Oh, Tony—"

"No, come on, now, Lou. How do you do it? Don't you have *any* idea?"

She brushed past him and began to gather up the scattered jewelry on the bed, dumping it back into the box by the handful. "Magic."

Tony slapped the bureau with his hand. "Well, goddamit, why didn't you just say so? Magic. That's great. Better than I thought. If you were just careless or disorganized, I'm not sure what I'd do. I mean, here you are, a woman with a Master's degree in Business Administration who spends her days keeping the largest manufacturing firm in the state rolling along turning out widgets, gidgets, and gadgets but who can't keep track of her possessions from one moment to the next—that would be too absurd to believe. But *magic*. Now *there's* an explanation that's not only rational, but full of potential for profit! We could both quit our jobs and tour the country with our own magic act. Louise Belmont performing prestidigitation and sleights-of-hand before your very eyes, aided by her faithful husband Tony. We'll play everywhere—Vegas, the Borscht circuit, who knows? Maybe even a command performance for the Queen in London! Your Majesty, where did you say you remember seeing the Crown Jewels last?"

Lou straightened up slowly, holding the box tight against her stomach so she wouldn't fling it in her husband's face. "That's no way to talk to a woman with a curse on her."

Tony exploded with laughter. She ignored him and set the box on the bureau. Then she sat down on the edge of the bed and watched him coldly until he wound down.

"Oh, God," he said, grabbing for a tissue. "If this weren't so serious, it really would be funny." He dabbed at his eyes and laughed a little more.

Lou's mouth was an angry line. "Funny to you. I'm the one with the curse."

Tony's smile faded away. "You don't actually believe that—"

"I don't know what else it could be." She looked away from him. "I've tried everything to keep from losing stuff—making lists, memory courses—I even went to a fancy, high-priced psychiatrist for some industrial strength analysis. You know what he told me? I tend to lose things. What an analysis. I knew that already." She wiped her light brown hair away from her forehead. "The only explanation left is magic. Sorcery. I'm an inadvertent sorceress. Somehow I put spells on things and make them go away."

Tony bent and squinted into her face. "Lou."

"What."

"Look at me."

She raised her eyes to meet his.

"Now I want you to look me square in the face and say all that again without laughing."

She turned away. "Lay off, Tone."

"I mean it, Lou. If you actually believe all that garbage you just said, you've got a bigger problem than just losing things. Not only am I going to have to lock up everything of value, but I'll have to have you deprogrammed as well."

"I'm not crazy."

"Oh, no?"

Lou sat up sharply, bouncing a little on the mattress. "I'll prove it. Give me something."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Sweetheart—"

"I'm not kidding. Give me something."

"For God's sake—"

"*Give me something.*"

He picked up one of her necklaces from the bureau.

"Not that. Something of yours. Something important to you. Something you don't want to do without."

After a moment of thought, he began pulling off his wedding ring.

"Oh, thanks a lot, *pal*."

He held the ring up. "Something important to me."

Lou's eyes narrowed. "You're putting me in a bad spot, Tone. If it disappears, it's gone forever. You'll never see it again. But if it doesn't, that'll say more about you than it does about me. All of it bad."

"It's important to me," he insisted. "And you can't make things disappear by magic. You're just careless."

"I am not." She took the ring from him. It was a simple white-gold band, just like her own, with their initials and the date of their wedding engraved on the inside. "Now. Observe." He groaned as she reached down and pulled her blazer pocket inside out. "An ordinary pocket, perfectly intact, no holes in it—"

“Lou, you’re getting silly—”

“*Perfectly intact, no holes in it.*” She pushed the lining back down again. “Now. I’m going to drop the ring into this pocket.” She did so and held the pocket open. “Look. Look down inside and make sure the ring is still there.

Tony sighed.

“Do it or you’ll never believe me.”

He looked and nodded. “I see it.”

“Fine.” She folded her hands on her knees. “Now we wait.”

“For what?”

“For the ring to disappear. I think it takes me a little longer with precious metals than with ordinary objects.” She tilted her head thoughtfully. “I must have a lot of trouble vanishing precious gems. You gave me those earrings three months ago at least.”

“Lou, this is insane.”

She arched her eyebrows at him. “Is it?”

“Yes, it is. There’s no such thing as real magic. And if there were, you wouldn’t be able to perform it by accident. Magic requires a lot of ritual.”

“If there’s no such thing, how would you know that?”

“I’ve read about magic, just like anyone else has. Including you, it would seem. Except I never heard you mention any of this stuff before.” He frowned at her suspiciously. “Did you ever fool around with witchcraft?”

“I don’t know anything about witchcraft. That’s probably part of my problem. If I did study up on it, maybe I could find out what I was doing or saying and stop it.” Lou wet her lips. “I never said anything before because it sounds as crazy to me as it does to you. For a long time I never considered such a thing. But all my life I’ve been a loser. Literally. I don’t know how I got through school. I had to pull all-nighters constantly to do papers. If I didn’t, I’d have too much time in which to lose them. I wrote my Master’s thesis in a week and even then I lost it three times. If I hadn’t kept copies with all my friends, I’d probably still be trying to write it.” She gave a small laugh. “When I went to work, I really had to learn how to think fast. I used the multiple copy device from college, but even so, an awful lot of important contracts were, ah, lost in the mail. The day I got a secretary was the best day of my life. I just dumped everything with her and called for things as I needed them. Now I’ve got a whole battalion of assistants, and I do just fine. Except with the office supplies. I’ve taken to buying my own at a stationery store. It’s expensive, but it’s easier than trying to explain how I can go through all those paper clips, rubber bands, manila envelopes, and pens so quickly.”

Tony stared at her, his mouth partially open.

“If that doesn’t sound like magic to you, then what in hell would you call it?” she asked plaintively. He didn’t answer. “You can look in my pocket now. I’m sure your ring is gone.”

He looked. She kept her face averted as he stood bent over her pocket, transfixed. He made her stand up and patted her down the way cops frisked suspects on television. He felt around on the bed and on the floor underneath, crawling back and forth, digging his fingers into the nap. He took off her shoes and shook them out, peered into her mouth, ran her fingers through her hair.

"Satisfied?" she asked when he finally plumped down on the bed, holding his ringless left hand up in front of his face.

"I don't believe it," he murmured, "but I believe it."

"Wonderful. Now let's go celebrate my thirtieth birthday. Thirty years of losses probably totaling in the hundreds of thousands, including a hundred dollar wedding ring and a pair of earrings worth over two grand." She laughed bitterly. "Happy birthday to me."

It was a quiet ride to the restaurant.

"Maybe it's swearing," Tony said to her suddenly over their third cocktail.

She nearly spat her daiquiri out onto the table. "Maybe *what's* swearing?"

"Your vanishing act. Your making things disappear."

At the next table, a man glanced up from his menu at them and then looked down again. Lou speared a fried mushroom from the appetizer dish and chewed it sullenly. "What are you talking about?"

Tony leaned over the table, blinking at her. He'd been drinking Black Russians and she couldn't really blame him. "You said it was magic, a curse on you, right? Maybe it is. Literally. Maybe every time you curse, you lose something." He tried to stab a mushroom for himself, missed, and tried again.

"That's the dumbest thing I ever heard."

Tony switched his attention from mushrooms to black olives with success. "Listen to that," he said to the olive on the end of the plastic pick he was holding. "She tells me there's a magic curse on her, and when I make a suggestion as to what's causing it, she says it's dumb." He popped the olive into his mouth and gave her a dirty look.

"Before you put all that alcohol in your system, you thought it was all pretty dumb."

"Of course it's dumb." Tony took a sip of his Black Russian. "I'm drunk. And well I should be. Today my wife disposed of a pair of diamond earrings and my wedding ring. Right now everything else sounds reasonable."

Lou sighed, rested her elbow on the table, and plunked her chin in her hand. "All right. But just what made you come up with the idea that my swearing would make things disappear?"

“I made the association. Curse—cursing—swearing. Simple as that.”

“There’s only one thing wrong with that theory, bright guy. I didn’t curse when your ring disappeared.”

Tony’s chin lifted abruptly. “Yes, you did. You said ‘hell.’”

“I didn’t.” Lou frowned. “Did I?”

“Yep. You said something about how if your losing things wasn’t magic, what the hell was it? Or something like that.” He looked around for the waitress and signalled for two more drinks.

“I guess I did.” Lou rubbed the side of her face. “I don’t really remember. I’m a little toasted myself. Wish the food would come.”

“We’re lucky you didn’t say, ‘Wish the *goddam* food would come.’ God knows what you’d lose now.”

“It still doesn’t work, Tone.”

“And why not?”

“Because I must have cursed hundreds of times during the three months I had the earrings.”

“Regular little potty-mouth, aren’t you? So?”

“Well, I didn’t lost them till tonight, *dear*,” she said with exaggerated patience. “Do you see what I mean?”

“Ah.” He nodded, grimacing at the appetizer plate. “Ah.” He pointed a finger at her. “But maybe conditions weren’t right.”

“Conditions?”

The waitress came and set down two more glasses, picking up the empty ones. “It shouldn’t be much longer,” she told them. “Chicken Cordon Bleu takes a little time to do right.” Neither of them paid any attention to her.

“Remember what you said when you did the magic act in the bedroom?” Tony asked. “How I had to give you something I really cared about?”

The waitress gave Lou a strange look before she walked away.

“I cared about my earrings,” Lou said huffily. “They weren’t just trinkets, for Chr—”

Tony put up his hand. “Restrain yourself. I may not have this right, but let’s not take any chances, okay?”

Lou looked up at the ceiling. When she looked down, she found the man at the next table was staring at her again. She wrinkled her nose at him. “Okay, okay. But I still cared about my earrings.”

“Sure. In a distracted way. Tonight, though, you really wanted to wear them. So you went looking for them and as soon as you did, you started worrying because you know you always lose things. The pressure was building up, you probably said something like ‘hell,’ and—” He popped his cheek with his finger. “Gone without a trace. Just like my ring, which was as important to you as it was to me.”

Lou sat perfectly still. “I said, ‘damn it.’”

Tony's eyes widened. "Oh. You did?"

She nodded.

"Uh-huh." He tapped his fingers on the table. "You know, I still didn't quite believe it. I mean, I was just talking. One absurdity's as good as another absurdity. Now I'm getting nervous." He took a large drink from his glass. "And sober. But not for long, I hope."

Lou sipped at her own drink without tasting it. "That isn't going to help me figure out how to beat this thing."

Tony shrugged. "Try watching your mouth?"

"It would be better if I could find a way to get un-cursed. I don't want to be a sorceress. I've been making things disappear all my life, ever since I was a little girl—"

"Sneaking little curses under your breath, no doubt."

"No. *No.*" Lou rapped her knuckles on the table. "Now that I do know. I was a very clean little kid. The worst thing I ever said was 'Oh, my God.'"

"Which is technically swearing."

"It *is*?"

"Taking You-Know-Who's name in vain. That's swearing. Cursing."

"Oh, G—great."

Tony brightened. "Hey. Maybe we can figure a way to bring things back."

"What?"

"Yeah. Now that we've figured out how you're losing things, maybe we can dope out some way you can reverse the spell and find them again."

The waitress came with their meals, setting the plates down in front of them slowly, in case there was any more interesting talk about magic acts in the bedroom. When there wasn't, she left. Lou picked up her knife and fork and began sawing at her chicken.

"I don't think so," she said. "Tonight was the first time I'd done anything like I did with your ring. I was always too terrified that it would work. Which it did. It took me thirty years to get to that point. I'll probably be sixty before I stumble over a reversing spell. And I don't think there is one."

"There has to be," Tony said around a mouthful of red snapper. "Magic is symmetrical. Yin and yang, all that."

"You're talking about the magic you've come across in books. Popular culture stuff and covens in California. What we're dealing with is magic that works. That stuff doesn't."

Tony dragged his head from side to side. "If it works one way, it's got to work the other. Even magic—real magic—must have laws, just like nature. Hell, you're even governed by one of them. Action: swear. Reaction: disappearance."

The light buzz Lou had been feeling was beginning to wear off as her

stomach filled. "All right. That sounds reasonable, about as reasonable as it can sound, considering. H—heck."

Tony winced. "That was close."

"I thought there had to be *conditions*."

"Don't tempt fate."

"This is peachy," she said sourly. "I can spend my life either losing things or sounding like Little Mary Sunshine. What the—What is this, anyway? I didn't ask to be a sorceress."

"Relax." Tony patted her hand clumsily. "Cheer up. I helped you find out why you always lost things. I bet I can help you find them again." Much to her dismay, he signalled for another drink.

By the time they were ready to leave, Tony was nearly in a stupor. She managed to get him to walk from the restaurant to where the car was parked but there was no question of his driving. "Thanks a lot, Tone," she muttered as she buckled him into the passenger seat. "*My birthday and you get bombed. Thanks a bundle.*"

His eyes opened to slits and he smiled at her sleepily. "You're welcome. Happy birthday." Then he was out again, really out. She slammed the car door and stalked around to the driver's side, not very steady herself. She hated driving when she'd had even just one drink, but she'd always been able to hold her alcohol better than Tony. Still, she couldn't remember the last time she'd seen him so drunk.

Not that she wouldn't have liked to be smashed herself, she thought, keeping to an even twenty-five miles per hour all the way home. She had more reason for it than Tony did certainly. She glanced at his limp form, drooping like a rag in the shoulder harness, and felt a little surge of anger. Here she was, an unwilling sorceress in the middle of a modern American city with a power that could do her absolutely no good at all, and when she needed his help, what did he do? Got drunk and passed out.

She clamped her lips together. Don't say it, she told herself. Don't say it or you're sure to vanish the house keys, because in a few more blocks they're what you're going to want most.

She maintained control, not even allowing a sigh to escape her until she drove the car into the garage attached to their house. If Tony had been not indisposed, he would have insisted on backing the car in so he could just drive out the next day, but she wasn't about to attempt such a thing. Tony could just back out of the driveway for a change. It wouldn't kill him.

She got out of the car and went to unlock the door to the kitchen, fumbling with the keys in the dark. She flipped the garage light switch and found to her great annoyance the bulb was burned out. Now she'd have to practically carry Tony inside in the dark. Sighing, she unlocked the door and

began feeling her way around to Tony's side of the car.

"Tony? Tony, we're home." She heard a faint answering moan. He was going to be righteously sick in the morning. "Tony, wake up so I can get you in—" Her foot hit something hard with an alarming clatter and she lost her balance, falling sideways onto the hood of the car. "Oh, goddammit!" she yelled, struggling to push herself upright.

Then she froze, leaning on the car, realizing what she had said.

"Tony! *Tony!*" She pushed herself around the front of the car, banging her knee on the bumper. "Tony, I said it! I slipped and said 'goddam', Tony, quick, wake up, we've got to find out what I lost this time. The house keys—"

She yanked the car door open. The flash of the dome light hurt her eyes, and for several seconds she could only stand blinking at the empty front seat.

"Oh, darn," she said miserably. "Oh, goshdarn it all to blazes."

The front seat stayed empty.

▼

i n t r o d u c t i o n t o

50 WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR ORGASM

Still in a humorous mood here.

We were having our weekly party on the Delphi network in the Science Fiction Special Interest Group (aka the SF SIG) when the conversation turned to methods of increasing the circulation of one of our favorite magazines, Asimov's SF. "Tantalizing cover blurbs, like Cosmo," suggested Lawrence Person. "Something like '50 Ways To Improve Your Orgasm.'"

"Sounds good," said Asimov's editor Gardner Dozois, who was also online that night, "but we'd have to have a story by that title—"

"Okay," I said cheerfully.

"—and they probably wouldn't let me put that on the cover anyway," Gardner finished.

I was already up to number six, and I didn't care. Maggie Flinn bravely took on the story that would have the only title even more tantalizing—"50 More Ways to Improve Your Orgasm," stating, "I like a challenge." Attagirl, Mags.

Both stories appeared in consecutive months in Asimov's and, just as Gardner had said, they didn't let him put the titles on the cover. But will these methods improve your orgasm? As with anything else, your mileage may vary. All you can do is wrap the rascal (if there's a rascal involved) and hope for the best.

▼

50 Ways to Improve Your Orgasm



A Short History Of the Orgasm On Earth

For millennia before recorded history, the orgasm had existed, but in the wild, usually unrecognized, or erroneously identified as some supernatural phenomenon, a message or possibly a visitation from one or more gods, or, among tribes with a less sanguine worldview, possession by demons. Thus, the fate of some who acknowledged experiencing such a thing could be elevation to a place of honor in their community—minstrel, shaman, or supreme dictator for life—while others faced punishment in the form of crippling, exile, or even death by stoning.

It seems to have been only after the entire planet passed through a frigid epoch that the orgasm began to be perceived as something far more *personal*¹ than a phenomenon of nature, such as tides, thunderstorms, and earthquakes. As usual, the chronology is mostly guess-work, since the orgasm left fewer signs of its presence than the glaciers. However, cave-wall ephemera dating from that time does seem to have been produced by humans who had more than a passing acquaintance with the concept of the orgasm as an attainable goal, at least in theory. Expert modules who have surveyed this *artwork*² conclude that the ancient humans' approach to orgasm was as primitive as everything else about them: the orgasm is conceived in some examples as a large, non-sapient (we assume) beast that poses a possible threat to the status quo, or possibly even existence itself (even with our restoration techniques, cave-wall ephemera is quite faint, so it is difficult to tell), and must be subdued by a number of humans acting in concert.

Evidence indicates that the same fate did not apply to each great orgasm

beast, so we perforce conclude that by this time, humans had begun to differentiate orgasm *qualitatively*—i.e., some were judged to be good while others were judged to be evil. Unfortunately, we know too little to be able to determine which were the good ones and which were evil—some beasts are rendered as having been consumed, while others were flayed and used as body-upholstery; still others became fetishes for specific locations on the body, such as the hair, the ears, the nose, the neck, the arms and legs, etc., while a few were given positions as minor deities. We could postulate that consumption was for evil orgasm while godhood was reserved for the very best of the good, but that would not take into account the humans' often antagonistic relationship with their gods. So it could easily be the other way around—only the very best of the good were ingested, while the evil were given a deity's position and forced to assume all blame for any occurrence the humans regarded as having an evil quality.

The rise of *civilization*³ is indisputable proof that the humans had finally divined the nature of orgasm with respect to themselves and took what they felt was the noblest course: they patterned their entire existence to conform to the orgasm both as concept and artifact. The journey of humans through both time and space became a tribute to the course of orgasm, always concluding with *arrival* (our nearest equivalent term), at spatial location (maps were helpfully provided so that the thoughtful human could choose whether to take the quickest or slowest route), at a point in time (they became completely dependent on calendars and other timekeeping devices, and seem to have often found it desirable to *arrive* during some phase of their planet's nearest satellite, an odd phenomenon but perhaps simply an especially long-lived—for them—tradition preserved by popular sentiment), or at a stage in life (this has a connection with their timekeeping systems).

Having evolved (voluntarily and involuntarily) to such a noble plateau, they should have been able to take The Next Step and *arrive* at Consciousness of Universal Oneness. Instead, the journey of the humans toward Enlightenment took an unexpected and quite tragic turn that may remain inexplicable even at the Heat *Arrival*, no matter how much contemplation is devoted to it.

Still, we have managed to pinpoint the cause, at least partially. After a very short period of time, the humans, without warning, *arrived* at something called *Industrialized*⁴ Society, after which they apparently *forgot all accumulated knowledge of orgasm as their purpose in life!*

It seems pretty clear that this deficit was caused by the build-up of toxic by-products of industrialization. This problem was compounded by psychic damage wrought by the existence of something so antithetical to orgasm—not to mention the absence of orgasm from the lives of the humans who

would not have achieved industrialization without it. The paradox of the situation certainly must have brought them to the brink of extinction more than once, if not extinction of life itself then extinction of sapience.

However, not *all* humans had forgotten, which brings us to the overriding irony of the human condition: the fact that they had not *arrived* at Consciousness of Universal Oneness was actually what saved them (that is, for a little while).

A breed of humans seems to have arisen spontaneously in response to the tragic absence of orgasm as concept and artifact in the model of life. These humans apparently set themselves the sacred task of restoring orgasm to humanity and, thus, humanity to orgasm. Sadly, the nobility of their intentions did not confer upon them the higher consciousness necessary for them to divine the true nature of their mission, and from our vantage point, their efforts look mindlessly mechanical. Still, they toiled mightily to remind humanity as a whole that it was once a race devoted to orgasm. Indeed, it has been speculated that even if these humans had known that their efforts were doomed ultimately to failure, they would have proceeded nonetheless, driven by a proto-selflessness we recognize as the initial potential for Consciousness of Universal Oneness, and by an abiding faith in a future *arrival*.

Of these humans, not all were very knowledgeable, highly skilled, or even completely devoted to the cause, yet all seemed to have managed to produce some positive, if temporary, result. It is from their efforts that we have distilled the following information, which could serve as a handbook for humans and which, it is felt, contains much that all life-forms could profit by.

B. 50 Ways To Improve Your Orgasm

The information contained herein was distilled from the many and varied sources of recorded information, some of which resisted all usual methods of extraction. In these cases, we were forced to improvise, sometimes even in the interpretation of the yield. Even so, it will be clear that the spirit of the information was preserved.

It must be emphasized here that since humans were lifeforms that always occupied a particular place in space and time, orgasm was a given and a constant. Thus, what follows is not a listing of methods to induce orgasm, but to improve the orgasmic experience.

Subgroup #1: Orgasm by Aural Stimulation

1. Noise, Unorganized

In the case of the humans, the greater the population density, the more noise

was present (unbelievers must temper their skepticism of this fact with the understanding that they may be provincial). Possibly in an instinctive groping toward the concept of Universal Oneness, humans' proximity to each other increased steadily, while the effectiveness of barriers to noise was lowered. Humans lived with the constant sound of other humans or their machines stimulating them aurally. Eventually, this would cause them to *arrive* in another location. Those who did not live in large centers of dense population activated various sorts of artificial receptors which brought any desired and/or random noise to them.

2. *Noise, Organized*

Usually produced by artificial receptors, on occasion by humans singly or in groups. The latter often took place in large gathering places, where humans assumed one of two roles: listener or listenee. Listenees were, almost without exception, given noise by the listeners when they had concluded their own presentation of noise. Some listenees considered themselves to have *arrived* if this happened often enough in certain ways.

3. *Noise, Specific*

Humans often isolated certain patterns of noise and listened to them in a state that was also isolated.

4. *Noise, Organic*

Human bodies themselves were a source of various noises and were listened to sometimes by one human or in tandem with a few others. This seemed to be successful, as human records are rife with notations about humans having *arrived* at a conclusion (sometimes by jumping) or at a diagnosis (closest equivalent term: prognostication). Unfortunately, the latter sometimes proved fatal to individuals, for reasons we have yet to understand.

5. *Noise, Bestial*

Many humans listened deliberately to species of limited sapience, even some that were non-sapient. A few of these humans became outright perverts, however, in that the *animals* were made to assume the *arrival*. Example: "Arrive here, Rover! Arrive, arrive! Good dog! Heal!" (The *non sequitur* plea for corporeal restorative manipulation seems to be not only how the perversion manifested—perhaps an inadvertent cry for help?—but also a systematic way of asking/telling other like perverts in the vicinity to make themselves known.) Note: this is considered perversion when it is only the animal who *arrives* at the human and the human never *arrives* at the animal. Many humans, however, took the novel approach of joining the animals (cf. "walking the dog") and both would *arrive* somewhere together,

usually with a straplike thing held between them. This was both condoned and encouraged.

Subgroup #2: Orgasm By Visual Stimulation

6. Watching, Everything

Watching, seeing, looking, ogling, staring, peering, and peeking were all used by humans to determine what locations in space they might want to go to and thus *arrive* at. Some humans' visual intake was indiscriminate and profligate, but this was probably a reaction to their visual perception being confined to a very tiny area of the spectrum. See other references to glaring, glowering, frowning, glancing, squinting, keeping an eye on (cross-reference with tactile subgroup), being on the look-out (post-*arrival* wariness, which seems to be a contradiction in terms), and "why don't you watch where you're going!" (a good question).

7. Watching, Humans

Humans spent a lot of time looking at each other, many times as a prelude to offering orgasm. Example: "Why don't you *arrive* up [here] and see me sometime?" or the even more preliminary "Is that a foreign object lodged in your upholstery [nearest equivalent terms] or are you just glad to see me?" See also *Human Rhetorical Language: Myth Or Reality?*

8. Watching, Objects

Many humans spent a good part of their lives looking at objects, some stationary, some animated yet technically inorganic and not alive. Some of them participated in a kind of game on extremely long and narrow playing fields, in which one human, after perceiving another pursuing *arrival* in an object called a car (see below), would give chase until the first human brought the car to a halt, at which point, the second human would arrive at the first human. The second human was always upholstered ceremonially, while no particular upholstery was required for the other player. The second human usually bestowed an artifact that seems to have been a token of admission to another spatial location of *arrival*. It is surmised that the interruption was the reason for displeasure in the other player, but this occurred with such regularity and was obviously so integral to the game that we can only wonder why those humans who were angered by it didn't just quit playing.

9. Watching, Passive

Some humans did nothing other than sit while they watched something. May be illustrative of the human motto/instruction(?): "If Mohammed will not *arrive* at the mountain, then the mountain will *arrive* at Mohammed."

10. Watching, Aggressive

Some humans moved very energetically, even if only in place (see below, *Orgasm in Groups*), usually while exhorting fellow humans to *arrive*. Example: “*Arrive*, you bums, you’re only three games out of first!” (The words translate but the idea doesn’t; obviously idiomatic usage.) The effectiveness of these exhortations was irregular and unpredictable.

11. Watching, Dominant

In some situations, the role of the observer took major importance; who was watching mattered as much as, and sometimes more than the incident or object under surveillance. The very presence of an observer could induce an arrival by a group in a location called courts-o-law [translator’s best guess].

12. Watching, Submissive

Humans possessed a great deal of curiosity. Sometimes groups of them would gather spontaneously and without warning to stare at the results of machinery malfunction or miscalculation, or at the composition or deliberate dismantling of any sheltering structure. Others concealed the fact of their observation by obscuring their presence and peering through cavities for access tools (“keyholes” in the original; untranslatable). Their observations had little or no effect on the course of the events unfolding before them, but at least they got to *arrive* somewhere.

13. Watching, Symbols

Human society is considered by many to be backward simply because they would arrive first and then watch symbols, which were projected onto some central location by means of light.

Subgroup #3: Orgasm By Tactile Stimulation*14. Full Body Contact*

Humans often immersed themselves in a liquid medium (boundaries varied), ceremonially upholstered (and sometimes ceremonially divested of all upholstery), and emulated aquatic life-forms. Some were fond of traversing a gap called ‘the English Channel’ just before their *arrival* on a landmass. Others hurtled from great heights, abandoning conveyances they called “planes” borne on air currents, choosing to *arrive* without mechanical means somewhere on the planet. It has not been determined whether the pleasure of *arrival* was enhanced by the casting off of the conveyance, the displaying of an upholstery adjunct meant to fan out overhead by catching the wind (see similar: peacocks, other Earth birds), or the physical force of the *arrival* itself.

15. *Partial Body Contact*

“Feet”, body parts meant for conveyance of the body without mechanical means, were most often placed in contact with ground or ground-covering just prior to *arrival*. This was much admired; many humans professed the notion that “only if you had your feet on the ground” was it possible to “get anywhere” (one of their more endearing double-entendres). Often, whole groups of them would *arrive* at special configurations to cheer on other humans whose feet were repeatedly contacting special ground-covering just before they *arrived* at a conclusion (“finish line” in the original). (See: serial *arriving* in human society).

16. *No Body Contact*

It became more and more popular, especially near the end, for humans not only to upholster themselves but to encase themselves in conveyances. Whether they were knowingly emulating certain lower life forms (see: snails; hermit crabs) in deliberate tribute, or unknowingly in a regressive state cannot be determined. But it seems to have had something to do with the sudden fad for *arriving* as soon as possible.

17. *By Proxy*

Humans prevented from *arriving* somewhere themselves sometimes sent inanimate objects or noise (!) as a substitute. In some cases, other humans would replace them. Undoubtedly, these other humans experienced the *arrival*, which had to be a source of great frustration for those humans whose *arrival* had been rendered void.

18. *By Upholstery*

There is some disagreement as to whether upholstery belongs in the tactile sensation subgroup. The majority consensus is that because the upholstery was on the body, it was necessarily a tactile stimulation and not just incidental. Much of it was as ceremonial as it was protective, and it was the rare human who did not upholster in direct connection to an immediate *arrival*. This would seem to be borne out by one of their surviving texts, *Upholster For Results* (untranslatable original: *Dress For Success*).

Subgroup #4: Miscellaneous

Obviously, this is by far the largest subgroup and arguably a subgroup consisting of subgroups rather than normal components. Also, some items listed here may seem to overlap previous subgroups, but our uncertainty as to degree of overlap has caused them to be placed here. This situation cannot be helped—the humans were just too alien for normal quantifiers to apply.

For now, this solution will have to stand unless/until deeper understanding of the human condition is attained.

19. Orgasm In Cars

Cars were a member of a group of conveyances (others: trucks, buses, trains, planes, bikes, scooters, roller skates, skateboards), and the most popular of the conveyances among humans. Humans exercised direct control over their cars and enjoyed *arriving* in them so much that they often owned more than one. Sometimes the conveyance accommodated two or more people, and everyone would *arrive* at the same time. Most often, *arrival* by car was a two-pronged event—first, there was the *arrival* in the car itself, followed by the abandonment of the car in the designated *arrival*-by-car location and the humans proceeding on feet to another *arrival*. Sometimes there were multiple *arrivals*. Recognizing this as one of the most desirable of all situations, humans constructed great shelters called “malls” (completely untranslatable; nearest equivalent term: “temporary hive”) comprising many small loci. Humans sought to *arrive* at as many as possible within a given time limit.

20. Orgasm In Groups

Humans most often tried to compose their groups of other humans they were familiar with. However, when it was not possible for them to be accompanied by more familiar humans, they would apply for admission to any available group. Some groups were very large and *arrived* in enormous stadia constructed for the express purpose of containing them while they gyrated wildly, exhorting other humans divided into teams to *arrive* at what was considered a position of exceptional merit and thus superior (see: inferior, anterior, exterior, and posterior). Acceptance in these groups was a foregone conclusion. Denial more often took the nature of postponement and admission to another group planning an *arrival* at a later point in time. The temporal aspect could often take precedence over all other considerations and in a lot of cases was elevated to an outright fetish. Examples: “I can *arrive* for a later showing,” and “You’ve got to get me on that flight [whether this is the conveyance or the people on the conveyance is unclear]—I’ve got to *arrive* for a 3 o’clock meeting [another group situation, the nature of which is nebulous]!”

21. Orgasm In Public

Without question, over half of all *arrivals* took place not only in public, but in areas set up specifically for that purpose. The ceremonial and/or religious aspects of these areas are not always overt.

22. *Orgasm In Private*

Often ascribed to a class of humans labeled “a thief in the night.” (See: private property as sacred mythology and planetary rotation, undue importance of).

23. *Orgasm In The Non-Waking State*

Humans physiology had the peculiar side-effect of inducing illusions in those who were non-wakeful, which begs the question of how effective their repose actually was. These illusions often involved *arrivals* at unattainable points of time and/or space, and/or of unlikely situations. Example: “I dreamed [experienced an illusion] I *arrived* in Atlantic City and was crowned [anointed?] Miss America [mythological creature] in my Virginconfigured [untranslatable] upholstery.” (The upholstery has a specific name, but it is a pointless differentiation.)

24. *Orgasm In The Waking State*

All other *arrivals*. Sometimes expressed as: “Wake up. We have almost *arrived*.” (It was considered more acceptable to *arrive* with all participants in the wakeful state.)

25. *Unauthorized Orgasm*

This sometimes took the form of active fleeing from one location to *arrive* at another, and other times, an *arrival* at a spatial location to which admission was, for some reason, conditional if not actually denied. In the first instance, it is not the location of *arrival* that is as important as the leaving of the previous point in space. In the second instance, the *arrival* point is more important than where the human started out from.

26. *Seasonal Orgasm*

Two seasons were recognized by certain classes of humans: season, and off-season. The off-season *arrival* was seen as desirable for reasons we cannot fully divine at this point— something to do with transitory population densities and possibly recompense for aid in *arriving* (perhaps one of the most alien concepts we have encountered). Humans as a whole did seem to *arrive* more often in more different places when the air was at a higher temperature.

27. *Orgasm By Friction*

Humans had a high friction factor in their dealings with themselves, for reasons which may best be left uncovered. When friction increased beyond a certain measurable level (though how they measured it is also a mystery), they would *arrive* en masse at a mutually-agreed location and proceed *to*

disagree to the point of multiple deaths. The contradictory nature of this is so clearly manifest that the situation should have ceased due to implosion: if the location for *arrival* was agreed on, and *arrival* itself was accepted by all participants, how then was it possible for disagreement not only to ensue, but to be maintained for what often turned out to be indefinite and lengthy (for a short-lived species) periods of time?

28. *Orgasm On Demand*

The passive and active roles here are not as clear-cut as they might seem on first encounter. Some humans told others where to *arrive*, and of those on the receiving end of these orders, some obeyed, and some didn't.

29. *Orgasm By Manipulation: Passive*

Many humans depended on other humans to help them *arrive*, doing nothing to bring it about while the other human did everything. This was willing on both parts, requiring only a simple request from the passive participant. Example: "Cause me to *arrive* at 44th and Lexington." Both participants *arrived* there together.

30. *Orgasm By Manipulation: Active*

See previous entry; this would, of course, be the human who did everything. Sometimes these humans did not wait for requests, but solicited them. Example: "Cause you to *arrive* somewhere, buddy?" This also seems to have involved an exchange of inert materials, from one human's upholstery or upholstery adjuncts, to another's, and sometimes a further exchange in the opposite direction was needed as well. (See: ritual and superstition.)

31. *Delayed Orgasm*

What it sounds like. Example: "I will *arrive* tomorrow." It seems odd that a pleasure-loving species would delay *arrival* as they delayed other, less pleasurable activities, usually things called "reports" [untranslatable], "term papers" [untranslatable and incomprehensible], and "paying bills" [nearest equivalent term: "proffering tribute for acquisition"].

32. *Orgasm By Ingestion Of Liquids*

Usually by request: "Why don't you *arrive* for coffee?" or "Let's *arrive* for a few drinks." The former was usually a sequential thing—first the *arrival*, then the coffee (a type of ingestible liquid). In the latter case, the sequence was more rewarding: first there would be the *arrival*, followed by the ingestible liquids, which would then in turn cause most humans to *arrive* at a great altitude, or at least what they perceived as a great altitude (see: humans and "getting high").

33. *Orgasm By Ingestion of Solids*

Similar to the previous entry, but seldom if ever resulting in *arrival* at great altitudes, though there were exceptions. Example: "Wow, I'm getting a real sugar high."

34. *Orgasm By Ingestion of Other Substances*

Similar to "drinks" but often showing greater results in a shorter period of time (see humans and "getting really, really high"), and sometimes resulting in *arrival* at courts-o-law and prisons (untranslatable and inconceivable).

35. *Orgasm By Printed Matter*

Stationary symbols on inanimate surfaces were credited with helping humans *arrive* somewhere, usually at a station in life. Example: "You have to study if you want to 'get anywhere'."

36. *Orgasm In Inanimate Objects*

As ridiculous as it seems, there were thousands of humans devoted to changing the location of inanimate objects on a daily basis. Those humans so engaged planned their own *arrivals* around the quantity and size of the objects. Recipient humans insisted on ascribing *arrival* to the objects themselves. Example: "It *arrived* in the mail." Sometimes the human factor was recognized: "The mailman [an accepted redundancy] *arrived* with it this morning."

37. *Orgasm For Its Own Sake*

Only illustratable by example: "You can't *arrive* there from here." Thus, humans were led to the conclusion: "It will be necessary to *arrive* somewhere else first."

38. *Orgasm By Remote Control*

Similar to orgasm in inanimate objects and recognized as a less-than-perfect substitute. Example: "It's the next best thing to *arriving*."

39. *Orgasm By Use Of Objects: Inert*

Usually in a confined space. Example: "It's late, I think I'll *arrive* at bed."

40. *Orgasm By Use Of Objects: Self-Contained Power Source*

Also in restricted areas, a class of objects known as appliances. Example: "If you're going to *arrive* at the refrigerator, get me a beer." The refrigerator may have commemorated the frigid epoch. Another example: "You can *arrive* at the oven and find your supper contained within." The translation is unfortunately awkward, but nonetheless true to the literal meaning.

41. *Orgasm By Threat Of Impending Death*

Since humans were separated each from another, one death did not necessarily mean another. Sometimes the death threat was innerdirected. Example: "I'll just die if I don't get to *arrive* with the other kids [replacement life-forms]!"

42. *Orgasm With A Partner: One's Own*

Humans did have one custom that, as far as any can tell, is unique: many bonded with one other human for long periods of time—decades or, in some instances, until one of them died, possibly from over-bonding, the stress of longevity, or both. During that time, the humans set aside certain hours during which they would seldom, if ever, *arrive* anywhere without the partner; this includes the waking state. It is quite extraordinary to find this in creatures whose short lifespan necessarily dictated a short attention span.

43. *Orgasm With A Partner: Someone Else's*

The humans had a slogan: "Variety is the [flavor-tingle] of life," and they lived by it. While partnered humans did adhere to the hours set aside for *arriving* with their partners, they were profligate about their off-hours. It is theorized that some reaction to prolonged daylight stimulated the drive to *arrive*, at least in a certain percentage of them. Arrangements were made for the hyperactive human to *arrive* daily with a set group of other humans who were similarly partnered. Mostly their *arriving* was restricted to one general location which they left for a very short period in the middle of the day. During the time that they were absent, they would *arrive* somewhere nearby and ingest solids, before *arriving* again at the first location. Initially, it was thought that such displays of prowess were merely the by-product of excess hormones; however, there is stronger evidence that indicates these so-called displays were not treated as displays and were, in fact, regarded as very ordinary.

44. *Multiple Orgasm, Serial Variety: Indoor Form*

This differs from orgasm in groups in that although a group is necessary, it need not be a cohesive group and the multiple orgasm in question is not enjoyed by a member of the group, but always by someone outside of it. In the indoor form, use was made of ingestible liquids, solids, or both—a human would move through an indoor setting, offering them to a large group of people, most often broken down into subgroups of two, three, or four. The ingestibles were seldom refused, and the human would *arrive* at several subgroups within a *very* short period of time. Apparently, the more a human could *arrive* in this setting, the more desirable it was considered to be by the group, which made gifts of talismans and fetishes before some of them

retired from the scene. Stimulated, no doubt, by the multiple *arrivals* they had just witnessed, they wanted to *arrive* somewhere themselves.

45. *Multiple Orgasm, Serial Variety: Outdoor Form*

Once again, we have the set-up of a human *arriving* at several different groups and/or individuals, in this case at the entrypoint of sheltering structures. At times, the *arrival* itself is the endpoint, and a new arrival is pursued and enacted immediately afterwards; at other times, penetration follows *arrival*, and there may be further, less intense indoor *arrivals*.

46. *Orgasm At High Velocities*

The use of a conveyance is almost always involved, though the number of participants varies. Some humans apparently placed great importance on *arriving* as quickly as possible. It is surmised that the pleasure factor was low; there may have been a sense of obligation on the part of the humans.

47. *Orgasm Induced By Small, Enclosed Spaces*

A particular conveyance, almost always contained within a large, sheltering structure, was used to facilitate *arrival* of humans either singly, or in groups, at levels perpendicular to a vertical line of travel. Humans frequently experienced *false arrival*, which occurred when the conveyance paused at levels they had not planned to *arrive* at.

48. *Out-Of-Body Orgasm*

While all humans were corporeal, some claimed the ability to travel in essence, *arrive* at a different location, and then return, *arriving* in their own corporeal forms. This was considered controversial in some quarters and rude in others. Further study is needed to determine the exact nature of this *arrival*.

49. *The Final Orgasm*

Here we find the most amazing feature of human life: if humans did not, within a certain period of time, perform some accepted number of *arrivals*, they *arrived* beneath the planet's surface, a place to which they were permanently restricted. These final *arrivals* were facilitated by groups of humans while those to *arrive* in the soil remained completely passive.

50. *Pseudo-Orgasm or Simulated Orgasm*

This is the most puzzling feature of human life: humans, more often in pairs but sometimes in greater numbers, would claim to be *arriving* even though there was no preceding transit. While there was some movement, it was not any form of travel. Nonetheless, humans revered it highly, and usually made

a great deal of noise about it. Example: “I’m *arriving*! I’m *arriving*! Oh, deity!” They would also query each other: “Did you *arrive*?” An affirmative answer was highly desirable, while a reply of, “No, I didn’t *arrive*, but really, it was very nice and I enjoyed it,” was met with confusion, sadness, or even distaste. It is theorized that Pseudo-Orgasm was a function or side-effect of strange flaws in the biochemical system, causing illusions of having *arrived* somewhere. Compare this to *Orgasm In The NonWaking State*, in which humans know that the *arrival* is false. This is not the case here, and perhaps it is an error to list it with the other forty-nine.

This concludes all research to date, though further study is highly recommended. Humans were an aberration, but one that deserves our attention, if only so that we can discover how they came to forget Orgasm as their purpose for existence and relegated it to the realm of strictly physical phenomena.

To that end, we have obtained scrapings of human interior framework, and are about to proceed with a regeneracy program. As soon as we have two or more examples of human life, we plan to have them try out all fifty ways to improve orgasm—yes, even the false orgasm—in conjunction with the restoration of racial memory, should we find they carry any.

The results of this experiment should be fruitful, and will be available for examination as soon as they can be structured for perception.

And now, while the humans regenerate in the vat, we are going to test out another human motto while we *arrive* somewhere else. There is no question that humans enjoyed *arriving*, but they also seem to have enjoyed aspects that were only tangential to *arriving*. So we are going to see if there is any truth to the old human motto: “The process of *arriving* is half the fun.”⁵

Who knows but that this may further enrich the orgasm itself?

Pseudopodnotes

1. For an explanation of this unfamiliar term, see Trans-Missive 702937: *Solitary Consciousness In The Wakeful State*, a largely theoretical but fact-based essay on the nature of life-forms that cannot or will not (!) Subscribe.
2. *Artwork*: expression of idea/emotion emanating from some soft, vital, internal organ, sometimes the brain, sometimes the heart, and sometimes some other, such as the stomach or spleen.
3. *Civilization*: Incredible as it may seem, replacement organisms (our closest rendering of that ultimately untranslatable word *children*) achieved existence with no immediate knowledge of necessary constraints and/or

requirements except on the most brutish physical level; each one underwent a process designed to bring it into accepted formation. This formation as a whole was called *civilization*.

4. *Industrialized*: a general term indicating the dominant presence of complex non-organic artifacts and devices meant to *manufacture* (i.e., to cause existence/manifestation in a predetermined and completely limited form) more complex non-organic artifacts and devices, some of which were used by humans, and some of which used humans, either for maintenance or for further *manufacturing*. Once again, it is not always clear what humans used and what used them.

5. Compare and contrast with another human motto: “No matter where you *arrive*, there you have *arrived*.”

▼

i n t r o d u c t i o n t o
MOTHER'S MILT

This title appears on several different scraps of paper in my fragment box, but nothing came together for it until I was heading home from the Nebula Awards banquet in 1991. I fell asleep on the plane and dreamed something very like the story that follows. All I had to do was clean out some of the dream absurdities, add Mother, and stir.

I have a button that I wear on occasion: "I'm the mother people warned you about." This Mother is the one they should have warned you about, and didn't.

MOTHER'S MILT

Milt appeared at breakfast, about as unsavory a sight as you could ever see at 7:30 on a summer morning: long stringy hair threatening to dip into the bowl of cereal, old faded sweatshirt with the sleeves hacked off, showing wiry arms with a river of tattoos flowing up and down them, even older jeans faded to baby blue overlaid with a sheen of brown.

"Say hi to Milt, Lynn," my mother told me, planting a quart of milk on the table next to his technicolor elbow. "I bailed him out of jail last night instead of your father."

"Hi, Milt," I said.

His head moved slightly; I saw one watery hazel eye peering at me between the strands of hair and I could tell he was amused by the wary tone in my voice. I might have been amused, too, if I'd been in his position, but I wasn't. I looked at my mother. As usual, the creases in her crisp, white coverall seemed sharp enough to cut flesh. My mother never failed to do mornings extremely well, even if she'd been up very late the night before.

"Drunk driving," she said, sitting down at Milt's left with her own bowl of cereal. "We can't go on like that."

"Drunk driving isn't funny, Ma," I said. Milt sat up straight. He looked like a knife-murderer.

"I meant your father," she said, "not Milt. Milt was in on a shoplifting charge."

"I know who you meant."

Milt glanced at my mother. She patted his arm. "*Don't worry.* I said you could stay, so you can stay. If you want to."

"And if I don't," he said, turning that psycho face to me, "ain't you afraid of forfeiting the bail?"

"My mother isn't afraid of anything," I said. "Haven't you figured that out yet?"

Before my mother left for work at Busy Hands, she presented Milt with a complete list of his chores for the day, reading it aloud to him just in case he was, in her words, literate-embarrassed. "Do the dishes, tidy the living room, vacuum all the rugs, dust all the downstairs furniture, change the linens on the beds upstairs—there are three bedrooms, including the one you're staying in—and clean both bathrooms. Do a good job and I'll give you a treat when I get home from Busy Hands."

He took the list from her in what I thought of as Standard Dumb Amazement, blinking when she stood on tiptoe to pat him on the head, and then stared after her as she bustled out the door leading to the garage. Bustled was the only word for the way my mother moved; once you'd seen her do it, you understood exactly what it looked like. He went to the window over the sink and watched her drive away.

Finally, he turned back to me, holding the list the way I'd seen people hold bills from auto repair shops. "Is she kidding?" he asked me.

I spread a thin layer of cream cheese on the other half of my pumpernickel bagel. "Are you in jail?"

He laughed, crumpled the list, and tossed it over his shoulder into the sink. "What I am is outa here."

I got up, went to the junk drawer, and pulled out the gun. "I don't think so."

Those watery hazel eyes got very large. "Holy shit, girl! What are you doing?"

"Come on, *Milt*, what do *you* think?"

His gaze went from the gun to me, back to the gun and back to me.

"Give up?" I said. He started to raise his hands, just the way people did on TV. "The dishes. I'm helping you do the dishes."

He took a step toward me and I aimed at his crotch. Most people make the mistake of aiming a gun at a man's head or chest, but believe me, setting your sights lower will get their attention much better.

"Do I have to persuade you that I can and will use this on you? Do you think this is the first time I've had breakfast with a convicted felon on my mother's sufferance?"

He squinted at me. "Who *are* you people? What are you?"

"Conscientious citizens," I said.

"Listen, I don't want you here any more than you want to be here. But here we are." I jerked my head at the table. "Stack 'em and rack 'em. I'll

plead self-defense.”

“Are you gonna keep that gun on me all day? That’s what you’ll have to do.”

“We all gotta do what we gotta do, Milt,” I said. “And you gotta get busy.”

“How old are you?” he said suspiciously.

“Sixteen.”

“My God.” He didn’t believe me, of course; I’m built like a linebacker, hostage to genetics.

“The house is a mess, Milt,” I said. “Okay?”

He folded those skinny arms. “What if I just refuse to move?”

“Then it’s going to be a boring day for both of us,” I said. “And you’ll go back to jail at the end of it.”

That finally reached him. “I can’t do that. And I can’t stay here,” he said. “Please, honey—Lynn—give a guy a break, will ya?”

“You got a break. You’re out of jail.”

He was staring at the gun again.

“Well, sort of,” I added. “Look, my mother’s eccentric even by your standards—”

“I heard *that*.”

“—but don’t get the idea she isn’t serious. My mother doesn’t kid around. She doesn’t know how.” I gestured at the dishes waiting on the table. “Come on, Milt. Is it going to kill you to do a dish?”

He got the point, but I could tell even he was surprised to find himself gathering up bowls and silverware and plates and taking them to the sink. The whole time he was rinsing things off and putting them in the dishwasher, I could practically hear the wheels turning in his head: when could he get a good opening to try to overpower this big, crazy bruiser of a girl, how far could he run and how fast, and what the hell was he doing, why had he accepted his release to a total stranger in the first place? My mother always chose well, though. Old Milt had obviously spent more than a few nights sleeping rough and the prospect of spending at least one night indoors before he made off with anything that wasn’t nailed down with a value of over five dollars had been too tempting to resist. Going along with the crazy little grey-haired lady who had chosen to foot bail for him over her husband had been a pretty good idea in the middle of the night.

The phone rang just after he’d gotten the vacuum cleaner out of the hall closet. My mother, of course; she was pleased to hear that Milt was on schedule, but dismayed that I still had to hold the gun on him. As if that were unusual. Anyone would think she’d have learned by now—they spend at least one whole day working under the gun. My mother, the eternal optimist, always hoping that she’d get a quick study.

Just before lunch, he made a break for the front door. I let him yank on it and try to break the windows. Then I made him finish vacuuming the runner in the hall before I gave him his lunch. He kept muttering *I don't believe this* over and over while he spooned up tomato soup.

Dusting is when they usually try for the phone. I left the room briefly, just so he could get it over with. He was dabbing it with the feather duster when I came back. I wouldn't have brought it up, but he felt compelled to.

"How come you can get calls when the phone's dead?" he asked accusingly.

"The phone's not dead," I told him. "You just don't know how to use it."

"Jesus Christ." He threw down the feather duster. "I want to know what's going on here. Your mother said I could stay *if I wanted to*. Well, what if I don't want to?"

I hefted the gun slightly. "I think you want to."

He picked up the feather duster and finished doing the end tables and the bookcases.

There was another fuss about changing the beds. He didn't think he had to change his, since he'd just spent one night in it, and then he tried to tell me his back was too weak for him to turn the mattresses, a charade he insisted on playing out with all three of them, so it was a slow, clumsy process. But it got done. I let him have a snack break in front of the TV before I told him to set the kitchen table for dinner.

"That wasn't on the list," he said, unable to tear his eyes away from that skinny little game show hostess who waves her arms in front of washer-dryers as if they were miracles.

"My mother would want you to fill out the day with something useful," I told him.

"But really," he said, punching the couch cushion behind him, "I think I hurt my back with those damned mattresses. No fooling. I ought to get in a hot tub." He looked up at me and smiled for the first time. "God, a hot bath would be heaven right now. You could even stay there and keep the gun on me, I wouldn't mind."

I just bet he wouldn't. But he wasn't the only one who'd seen *The Beguiled*. Still, if you don't let them try everything, they don't believe. Seduction occurred to some of them sooner, and some of them later, and the second group usually try it on my mother rather than me.

"What did you have in mind?" I said. "A bubble bath?"

His smile got bigger and more enthusiastic. "You got something sweet-smelling? I bet you have. Something you like for your boyfriends to smell on you."

"I wear Obsession," I told him. "Only Obsession. It wouldn't smell right on you. There's Obsession *pour l'homme*, but we don't have any."

"Obsession, eh?" His smile shrank a bit. He was looking at the barrel of the gun again and didn't realize I knew what he was staring at. "You obsessed with guns?"

"No. Cleanliness, actually."

He threw back his head and laughed. The studio audience coincidentally laughed right along with him and he used the remote control to turn down the volume. "I can see that. All the more reason for me to take a bath before your mother gets home. So I can be as clean as the house when she comes in."

"This house isn't clean," I said. "The windows are filthy. You do those tomorrow."

He laughed again. "How's the old saying go? I don't do windows?"

"Yeah, sure, Milt. But it's just a saying. You change the drapes, too, and you vacuum upstairs and you clean the cellar and I don't know what all. My mother'll leave you a list, of course."

He slumped against the back of the couch. "Oh, come on, little lady. Lynn. Are you gonna spend another whole day holding that gun on me?"

"If I have to."

"What about tonight? You and your mom gonna take turns guarding me?"

"We lock you in your room. You were locked in last night, but I guess you didn't know it."

He combed his fingers through that stringy hair. "Look...all this has been, you know, kinda weird and kinky and interesting, but it's gotten old. I gotta tell you, I was really wondering about your mom last night when she bypassed your old man and took me out instead. It seemed like one of those great opportunities, too good to be true. See, I know sooner or later my prints are gonna turn up with my real name and then I'm in the soup for sure. So I thought, well, I'll go with this Good Samaritan—Good Samaritan-ness?" He gave a little nervous laugh. "Well, whatever. I'll go with her, and I'll have a little something to eat and a good night's sleep and then I'm off to Mexico, Canada, parts unknown—" he shrugged. "Then I get dishpan hands at gunpoint."

"You don't have dishpan hands," I said. "Dishwashers have made dishpan hands obsolete. You've got busy hands."

"Yeah, right. What is that, 'Busy Hands' where your mother works—a maid service?"

"You're exactly right. It's a maid service. My mother cleans houses for a living. But it's that old story—who shaves the barber? In this case, you do."

He stared at me, baffled. Apparently, he'd never heard that old chestnut about the village where every man who didn't shave himself was shaved by the barber, so who shaved the barber. I guess they don't get much parlor

philosophy in jail.

"Never mind," I said. "Break-time's over. Set the table."

He hesitated, ready to argue further, and then thought better of it. "You'll have to talk me through this," he said, leading the way into the kitchen. "I can never remember which fork goes on the right."

"That's easy," I said, "you never put forks on the right. You don't want to risk accidentally piercing a dinner companion."

He looked over his shoulder at me. "Really?"

I just shook my head. "Oh, dammit. We forgot to run the dishwasher. Well, you'll have to wash a few dishes by hand. There isn't time for a complete cycle before my mother comes home."

I had to poke him in the ribs with the gun a few times to get him in the right frame of mind. "See, now I am gonna get dishpan hands," he said grumpily as he stood at the sink.

"Not with Softi-Bubbles," I said, sitting at the table. "It's specially formulated to leave your skin sweetly soft while it cuts the grease. You can also wash your fine linens in it and even use it for bubble bath."

He snorted. "Yeah. The bubble bath I'm never gonna get."

I was really getting tired of his whining. "You can take a bath after dinner if you really want to."

He stacked the dishes in the rack to let them drain. "You can make me clean, but I gotta tell you, I can't cook, even with that gun to my head. You can blow my brains out if you want, but there's nothing I can do."

"That's okay. My mother will be bringing dinner home with her. She's got a friend in the catering business."

"Great. Rubber chicken."

"You could always go on a diet." As I'd figured, that shut him up fast. After experiencing bail my mother's way, he didn't want to know what her idea of a diet would be. He was stubborn, but he was learning.

When he finished setting the table, I decided to let him go back to watching TV in the living room until my mother came home, rest his weary back. I was pretty sure my mother would be pleased with the job he'd done on the house, so she wouldn't mind my giving him a little extra relaxing time.

And I was right. My mother walked through the house beaming with pleasure, while Milt and I trailed along behind her in a little parade. I still had the gun on him, of course—there was no telling if he'd be stupid enough to try attacking my mother. But her effusive praise caught him off-guard. After a day with me, he'd been expecting almost anything but that.

"I especially like the way you made the beds," she told him as we trooped back downstairs to the kitchen. "Is that how they do it in prison?"

"How'd you know I'd been in prison?" he asked.

"Get real, Milt," I said.

"Well, jail, yeah, but just about everybody's been in jail—"

My mother laughed. "Good heavens, where did you come by that idea? Young man, there are people who go their whole lives and never see the inside of a *jail*. Let alone the big house. Lynn's father was in the big house. We've learned to tell ex-cons by body language. And tattoos, of course." She ran a finger up his left arm as she ushered him into the kitchen. "Some of those are jailhouse tattoos. You really ought to have them worked on, covered over with better designs if you don't want to have them removed altogether."

All he could do was stare at her as she sat him at the table and took her place to his left.

"Lynn, you may serve now," she said, waving a hand at the white bags she had set on the counter. "And then afterwards, it'll be time for your treat," she added to Milt, wiggling her index finger in his stupefied face.

Tonight's offering was a stroganoff. I'd rather not eat so much red meat—in fact, I'd often thought of going vegetarian—but my mother wanted to keep me big. I worried about what the insides of my arteries looked like, even though my mother insisted that was no worry at all at my age.

"Jesus!" Milt said as the aroma hit him in the face. "I'm starved! Your daughter didn't give me much for lunch."

"Eating heavily in the middle of the day would have made you sleepy," my mother told him. "Now, chow down. You've earned it."

He'd finished half his plate before it occurred to him that I wasn't holding the gun on him any more. But I did have it in my lap, and it was pointing at him before he could make so much as a twitch in my mother's direction. She frowned at me and then gave Milt a look.

"Let's not fight at the table, you two." She turned back to me. "Okay?"

I shrugged. "He started it."

Milt's fork plopped in his food as he buried his face in his hands. "My God, my God," he moaned. "How did I get here? What's happening? What kinda crazy deal is this?"

My mother gave his forearm a small push. "Elbows off the table, Milt."

He peeked at her from between his fingers. "Lady, I don't know what's going on here with your locked doors and your unbreakable windows and your dead phones and your gun-toting daughter, but I think I wanna go back to jail."

"Oh, no, you wouldn't like that," my mother said. "Jail's so risky. My friend Carol the caterer might bail you out then, and you'd like that a lot less than this, believe-you-me. She bailed out Lynn's father around lunch-time." My mother shook her head, going *tch-tch-tch*. "She'll forfeit the bail, of course, but it was a last-minute thing, this dinner she had to do, and they *insisted* on stroganoff. The Royal Lodge of the Mooses said they'd pay one-

and-a-half times the normal fee for it, so even minus the lost bail money, Carol still makes out like a bandit.”

“Carol *always* makes out like a bandit,” I said. “She’s the Robin Hood of the testimonial set.”

“Yes, but catering is *so messy*,” said my mother. “I much prefer to clean up a mess than make one.” She paused, contemplating a noodle on the end of her fork. “You know, I also think I prefer weather that’s too cold to too hot. What about you, Milt?”

Milt’s expression was completely despairing. “Huh?”

“Do you prefer your weather too cold or too hot? Or, let’s put it this way—if you could, would you go to Canada or Mexico?”

“Why?” he asked tonelessly.

“This is just *dinner conversation*,” she said, a little exasperation creeping into her voice. “Everyone should know how to make small talk. Small talk’s got a bad rap. If you could see the way some of the more bashful guests suffer sitting next to each other at one of the banquets my friend Carol caters, you’d understand the virtues of being capable of superficial conversation.” She put down her fork and wiped her fingers on her napkin before laying a hand on Milt’s arm. “Milt, this is *your* civilization, the one *you* have to live in and you have *got* to get civilized.”

“Okay,” he said, “okay, okay, anything you say, whatever you like, lady. Just take me back to jail so I can plead guilty, pay my debt to society, and when I get out, I’ll go get civilized.”

“Well, *that’s* the *good* news,” my mother said brightly. “I was going to save it for after dinner, but I’m really impressed with those beds. The shoplifting charges have been dropped.”

His mouth fell open. A very unoriginal reaction, but at least it was harmless. “How?”

My mother spread her arms. “How do you think?” She leaned toward him, beaming like mad. “You have a job! With Busy Hands!” She grabbed both his hands in hers and gave them a little shake. “You passed the audition! You aced the try-out! You made the team! But you know, I really thought you would.” She turned to me without letting go of him. “Lynn? Dissenting opinion? Comments?”

I was still holding the gun on him while I ate. “You know me, Ma. I bow to your superior judgment. Do you have a uniform that will fit him?”

“No,” he said, snatching his hands away. “I won’t do it. Blow my brains all over this kitchen if you want, but I won’t do it. I won’t be no crazy lady’s slave. You can chain me up in the cellar, you can lock me in your attic, you can kill me. But I know my rights and you’re violating them. Ain’t no way you can kidnap somebody from jail and make them be a slave for you.”

“How do you kidnap somebody from jail?” I said. “Ma, do you know?”

"No, I don't." She chuckled. "Kidnapping's illegal. I've got all the official papers and everything—they signed him over to me, and he went of his own free will. What's the matter, Milt, housework got you down? I know you won't believe this, but it's actually easier to clean somebody else's house than your own.

That's why this place looked the way it did, before you went to work on it. Tomorrow, you can do the windows and take care of the draperies, there's the laundry—"

"No! Didn't you hear me, lady? I said, *no*! That's capital N, capital O, N-O, *no*!" He gave me a frightened look, as if he expected me to shoot him for that.

"You're just tired," my mother said, picking up her fork again. "You'll feel better after a good night's sleep. Always works for me—I used to feel this way after slaving all day for Lynn's father, and then he'd come home drunk, mess everything up—" she tucked some stroganoff into her mouth and chewed thoughtfully. "I just had to get a system, you know. Work with a system, and you can conquer the world. And I really thought Lynn's father had finally gotten his mind right at last. You know, we did have to chain him in the cellar for a while. That was awful, even with the soundproofing. But he was doing so well and then—" she shrugged. "Well, we salvaged what we could and there's no use crying over spilled stroganoff. Such as he is. I must say he's not half as gamy as I thought he'd be for the age he was." My mother twiddled her fork in the noodles. "You're much younger. You've got a chance now. Go with it, hon. I really would cry over spilled Milt."

He looked down at the stroganoff and turned almost as white as my mother's uniform.

"May I be excused?" I said, wiping my mouth. "I've got some stuff I'd like to do and obviously I haven't been able to get to it today."

"Go ahead. Milt will clean up. A week's training here," she added to him, "and then you can wear the uniform. Have a good six-month probationary period, and I'll let you ride up front with me in the van, where Lynn's father used to sit. *Lynn!*"

I paused in the doorway. "What?"

She held out her hand and snapped her fingers. "The *gun*, silly."

I'd carried it off without thinking. And of course, that was when Milt finally made his move. But he wasn't thinking either; he just lunged at my mother and she smacked him right in the mouth with the heel of her other hand, knocking him off the chair onto the floor. When I left, she was dabbing at his split lip with a napkin, holding the barrel of the gun under his chin. I resisted a joke about crying over split Milt.

Upstairs in my room, I fired up the computer, turned on the modem, and got into the police computer. That was one of the few things I had learned

that my mother hadn't taught me—in fact, I think it was the only thing she herself couldn't actually do. I tried to show her how once, but she just couldn't get it. Couldn't *hack* it was the way she put it, and she didn't even understand why I laughed when she said it.

Fortunately, the police still hadn't run Milt's prints, so I jiggered some stuff around to fix it so that they never would. In a town of this size, there's very little urgency to run someone's prints—nobody expects someone on the ten most wanted list to turn up on a shoplifting charge. My mother would say they were just lazy, good thing for us. Perhaps she was right, but I preferred to think that it was more like maybe the police were closing one eye and working with the Busy Hands system. There are lots of police families on my mother's client list, and you can practically eat off their floors.

I suppose it was cold, but I couldn't bring myself to feel particularly bad about my father. He'd never been a very good father; if he had, my mother would have given him a lot more latitude. I took care of his records while I was in the police computer—Carol would appreciate the favor—and then downloaded the arrest reports for the day. My mother wouldn't be going out to the jail again for a while, but it's always good to keep current. And who knew but that Carol might have another rush job to fulfill? She would appreciate that favor, too.

And she'd remember all these little favors I did her, so when I turned eighteen, she'd back me up when I finally went to my mother and told her how I felt. I mean, Busy Hands is a wonderful service, and I'm very proud of the way my mother started it with nothing and built it into the fine operation it is today. But the fact is, I really, *really* hate housework, even when someone else is doing it. It's just so *boring*.

But I think I've developed a real taste for the catering business.

▼

i n t r o d u c t i o n t o
TRUE FACES

Mike Resnick made me write this story for an anthology of sf mysteries called Whatdunnits. He presented me with a selection of perhaps half a dozen situations and this is the one I chose:

A human is murdered in an alien embassy. Seventeen aliens are present. All of them claim to be the murderer and all of them pass a lie detector test. Who killed the human, and why? How do you question aliens that are congenital liars?

Now, this sort of story is not exactly typical of me, which was all the more reason to do it. Of all the challenges in it, the one that hooked me was the fact that the aliens were liars. Everyone knows that truth is good and lies are bad, so that wasn't the issue I wanted to grapple with. A congenital liar has much more complex motivations than just not wanting you to know the truth. But when the liar in question is an alien, is the lie really a lie...or is it alien truth?

True Faces

“I

told you I wasn't in the mood for this,” Stilton whispered. I gave him an elbow in the ribs without looking away from the body of the woman lying on the floor of the large room. I'm never much in the mood for a strangulation murder myself, but it didn't pay to advertise. Not in this company. History, I thought; I'm looking at history, in the making right there in front of me. People had been strangled before, and they'd get strangled again, but this was the first time one had ever been strangled in an alien embassy. The first alien embassy, no less. Two firsts. And we were the first law enforcement officers on the scene, so that was three firsts. The day was definitely running hot.

On my other side, the tall man in the retro-tuxedo swallowed loudly for the millionth time. He'd said his name was Farber and given his occupation as secretary to the dead woman. I wasn't sure which was more striking, his old-fashioned get-up or his noisy peristaltic action. I'd never met anyone who could swallow loudly before—did that make it five firsts? I shoved the thought aside. The room was so quiet, I probably could have heard him digesting his food if I listened closely enough. The Lazarians either observed quiet as a religion, or they were as much in shock as the human employees, who were all huddled together on the far side of the room, too spooked even to whisper to each other.

There was only one Lazarian on this side of the room. The rest were gathered in a semi-circle around the corpse. There were about twenty of them and the grouping had this very odd formality to it, as if they'd all gathered there to seek an audience with the woman.

I turned to Farber, who reacted by swallowing again and then blotting his forehead with his sleeve. "One more time?" I gave Stilton another jab in the ribs.

"Ready," Stilton said sourly, moving so that I could see he had the interviewer aimed.

"Migod, I always thought it was just in the hollies that the police made you tell a story over and over," Farber said, glancing at the 'viewer's flat lens in a furtive way. I didn't make anything of that—the only people who never got nervous about having a 'viewer trained on them were dead or inhuman. Of course, it was hard to tell with the Lazarians—they looked a lot like scarecrows and I'd never seen a nervous scarecrow, or even an extraterrestrial facsimile.

"You can give us the 'viewer's digest condensed version," I told him. "The third recording doesn't need as much."

Farber swallowed. "Fine. I came in here and found Ms. Entwater just as you see her now, with the Lazarians gathered around her. Just as you see *them* now. The other human employees were elsewhere in the building but the one Lazarian rounded them all up, brought them in here, and hasn't allowed anyone to leave since. Then I called you. From here. Since I'm not allowed to leave, either."

I glanced at Stilton, who nodded. "And you say that Ms. Entwater's relationship with the Lazarians was...what?"

Swallow. His Adam's apple bounded up and down above his collar. "Cordial. Friendly. Very good. She liked them. She liked her work. If she had any enemies among the Lazarians, she never told me about it and she told me close to everything."

"Care to speculate on what she didn't tell you?" I asked.

He thought about that for a moment, swallowing. "She didn't tell me there was a Pilot in the building."

"Why not?"

"Either she didn't have a chance or she didn't think to." Swallow. "It's hardly necessary for the secretary to be updated hourly as to who drops by for a social visit and who doesn't."

"You're sure it was a social visit?"

Swallow. "Pilots come by all the time to visit the Lazarians. The Lazarians trained them in Interstellar Resonance Travel, so they feel a certain kinship to them, much more than to other humans, I think."

"Why do you think that?" I asked.

"Because they seldom have any interactions with any of the humans here. Except for Ms. Entwater, who sees them in and sees them out again." Swallow. "Saw them in. And out again."

"She always did, personally? Isn't that more of a job for a receptionist

or a secretary?"

"Dallette or I would see to other visits. The Pilots Ms. Entwater always saw to personally."

"Then she wouldn't have had to tell you in so many words that a Pilot was in the building," I said. "You'd know by whatever she was doing."

Swallow. "*If* I knew what she was doing. I was busy with press releases for most of the morning, so I was in the translation room."

"The Lazarian's press releases?"

Swallow, followed by a nod. "They like to alert the media themselves. About everything. Today it was various things about hollies they'd seen and what they thought about them and the dissolution of three-bond—"

"Wait a minute," I said. "You didn't mention that before." The old ways never failed. Get someone to tell a story over and over and something new was bound to show up.

Swallow. "I'm sorry. I wasn't hiding it—" a glance at the 'viewer "—I'd just forgotten. It's like a—a marriage breaking up, or maybe a long engagement. The Lazarians are—well, there are similarities, but there are always strange little differences embedded in them. In any case, it didn't concern Ms. Entwater."

"Are you sure?" I said.

"Absolutely." Swallow. "Ms. Entwater never, ah, intruded into their private lives."

I couldn't help laughing a little. "Come on. Celie Entwater's job was to gain improved understanding of the Lazarians. How could she do that unless she was acquainted with their private lives?"

"Ms. Entwater considered herself a diplomat engaged in deep study of another culture. She was rigorous in observing customs and taboos, all that sort of thing. She knew that if we offended them, they might close down and go back to Lazarus—"

"Lah-ah...ZA-AHR...eesh," came a deep, nasal-sounding voice behind me, enunciating each syllable as if it were a separate word, with a bit of a gargle on the ZA-AHR.

Farber swallowed and bowed from the waist. I turned around. The one free-ranging Lazarian in the room was standing as close as possible to Stilton, who rolled his eyes. The Lazarian custom of space-density had gotten old for him very quickly. I found it pretty off-putting myself—it was like dealing with a race of people who had been raised in crowded elevators, unable to be comfortable unless they were all on top of each other.

Which made the half-circle formation around Entwater's corpse doubly odd, I thought suddenly. They weren't as close to each other or to her as they could get. Because she was dead? Or some other Lazarian reason I had yet to find out?

"I need to question all the humans here," I said to the Lazarian. "If one of them killed Ms. Entwater, that person must be punished according to our law."

"Trrrrried and punished if found guilty," the Lazarian corrected. "Question."

Farber moved to my side, swallowing. "Thinta-ah requests permission to inquire something of you," he said to me, sounding ceremonial. I repressed the urge to sigh heavily; I'm no diplomat, and the six years I'd spent on the gang squad had made me tired of ritual. Maybe it should have prepared me for the more Byzantine protocols of extraterrestrials, but I've got a bad attitude. Twenty years ago, when the Lazarians had first arrived, maybe I'd have been much more excited, but then, I've always had low blood pressure anyway.

"Ask your question," I said.

"Say 'please,'" Farber whispered.

I smiled as broadly as I could. "Please."

The Lazarian put its six-digit hands on top of its sack-like head. "If Entwa-ahter is dead by one of us, wha-aht then?"

I glanced at Entwater again. From this distance, it was hard to see the details of the marks on her throat, but they could have been made by one of those Lazarian hands. One would have been enough—like the rest of their limbs, those digits were long and multi-jointed, and could have gone all the way around a human neck easily. "This is your embassy," I said, "which means to us, it is a piece of your nation. We would trust you to serve your own justice in this matter."

Stilton was looking at me like I was crazy. I didn't blame him. All of a sudden, I was talking like a hollie version of a diplomat. I couldn't help it; something about the Lazarians was making me go into awkward-formal mode.

The Lazarian put a hand on top of the 'viewer, much to Stilton's shock. "Truth ma-ah-chine."

I gave Farber a sidelong glance. "What now?"

Farber swallowed twice. "It would seem that Thinta-ah wants you to use the 'viewer on them." He gestured at the Lazarians standing around Entwater.

Stilton coughed. "I don't think it'll work. We're—ah—" he turned to the Lazarian "—we're too different." I could tell he was trying to imagine how those sackheads would register. The 'viewer worked on interpreting a lot of little things—facial expression, blood flow, temperature, eye and muscle movements, pulse, respiration, vocal quality and inflection, choice of words, context, and some other things I didn't have to bother remembering. It wasn't infallible, we'd all been told, but in my experience, I have yet to

see anyone beat it, not even the most hardened pathological liars. We were only allowed to use it to determine probable cause for search and/or arrest, not to determine official guilt or innocence, so it wasn't any more admissible in court than the old lie detector results had been, but it was useful enough.

"Can converrrt," said the Lazarian. "Ha-ahve progra-ahms to converrrt for our species."

Stilton held the 'viewer protectively close to his chest, giving me a desperate look.

"I don't know," I said. "I'd have to call—"

Farber swallowed. "Weren't you told to take every measure necessary to wrap this up as quickly as possible?" He leaned closer and lowered his voice. "Do you want to think about the repercussions of having an unsolved murder in the Lazarian embassy? They'll have to call out the National Guard to protect this place, and *all of us will still be trapped inside of it*. And that includes you and your partner. The door is *booby-trapped*. Something sonic. Break the plane from this side and you'll drop like a rock. When you wake up, you'll have the worst headache of your life." He jerked his head at the group of humans. "Some of them *tried* it. Ask them if they'll try it again. Get it through your head, no one is going to leave here until this is settled, and if it takes months, that's not Thinta-ah's problem."

"All right," I said. All right for now. Call in a siege team? I'd never get that okayed. I'd have to see about locating the control for the doorway knock-out and figure out how to disable it later. That would probably cause an international incident—interstellar incident?—but not as major an incident as a siege team storming the place.

I looked at the Lazarian, but that face was unreadable. As usual. It was actually the outer surface of a kind of flexible exoskeleton that covered the whole head, featureless except for irregular, opaque black patches where the eyes and mouth would be. I'd read somewhere that the exoskeleton thickened and then thinned out again on some cycle that was individual to each Lazarian, but no one knew what caused it or what it meant to the Lazarians, except that they referred to what lay beneath it as the 'true face,' which was never to be shown to another living being, not even if its owner were dead. Which I thought begged the question: what was the point of having a so-called 'true face' if nobody could ever see it?

Something teased at the edge of my mind. I looked over at the Lazarians still motionless around the corpse. Was the penalty for seeing a 'true face' immediate death?

Everyone was staring at me expectantly. "I should still probably call in for authorization," I said weakly.

"Ca-ahll," said the Lazarian, and it wasn't granting me permission, but giving me an order.

I took the cellular off my belt and punched the speed-dial for the direct line to the captain. The subsequent conversation was almost as brief.

"She says it's a go," I said, clipping the phone back onto my belt. Stilton looked outraged for half a second and then wiped all expression from his face. For some reason, 'viewer operators get extremely possessive about their baby. Normally, Stilton wouldn't even let me hold his. "Let's get the program and convert the 'viewer for Lazarians."

Farber looked distressed as he swallowed. "Well, I've just thought of a problem."

I winced. "Only one. What a relief."

"It's big one. The program is in Ms. Entwater's office upstairs. Everyone who was in the embassy at the time of Ms. Entwater's death is now here in this room, Lazarians and humans alike. We may not leave this room, not any of us."

"Why not?" I said, looking at Thinta-ah.

"Bee-cauzzzzeh," the Lazarian replied, still using the command voice.

"Oh," I said, hoping I didn't sound sarcastic and looked at Farber. "Any ideas?"

He took a long time swallowing. "We could call a courier to fetch the program for us. Of course, the courier will have to stay here with us afterwards."

"We'll charge the overtime to the embassy," I said, reaching for my cellular again.

The courier business took a little longer, since the courier made the mistake of entering the room we were all in first, forcing me to have to call out for another. Forewarned, the second courier put the program chips in an envelope and tossed it to me through the open doorway.

"Go to it," I said, handing the envelope to Stilton. His face had a slightly greenish cast to it.

"Before I fool with the 'viewer and quite possibly break it, maybe we should talk to the humans," he said.

"Our species *firrrrrrst*," said Thinta-ah, and it was another command. I wanted to object. Across the room, the half dozen human employees were also still huddled together, albeit less closely. Except for the Pilot, who had gotten tired of sitting and was now leaning against the wall behind the others, smoking a cigarette in a long holder. She looked happy, but all Pilots look happy all the time. It's something that happens to them as a result of their training. Maybe after that first trip, they never really 'came back,' so to speak.

"Do as you're told," Farber said to Stilton, managing to sound apologetic. "I've got a wife, a husband, and three children I'd like to see again before I'm much older, and I imagine you both have families as well."

I cleared my throat. In Stilton's case, that had been the wrong appeal to make; his significant others had voted him out three weeks before and he was still stinging from it.

But instead of giving Farber the evil eye, he went to work on the 'viewer, even allowing me to steady it for him while he changed chips.

It took Stilton about half an hour to get everything synchronized and in phase and whatever else—I'm no more of a techie than I am a diplomat, though I suspected the last fifteen minutes he spent on running tests and diagnostics was nothing but pure stalling.

"I guess it's ready," he said at last. "But even with all these adjustments and conversions for Lazarian biology, I don't know how well it's going to work with an exoskeleton."

"No ex-oh," said Thinta-ah, coming over to stand too close again. "True faaaa-aice."

The Lazarians gathered around Entwater made no perceptible physical movements, but something in the air changed. Everybody felt it, even the humans on the other side of the room. It was similar to the sudden presence of ozone before a lightning strike (don't ask me how I know about that unless you're ready for a story longer than this one), and for a moment, I thought I could actually feel my hair stand on end.

"I know your custom of not showing the true face," I said to Thinta-ah. "How—"

Thinta-ah made Stilton cringe by touching the 'viewer again. "Not a-ahlive."

"You'll allow a recording that we can look at?" Stilton said, amazed.

"A-ahllow to look a-aht recording *one time*," the Lazarian said, making a strange movement something like a full body shrug. The clothing, as loose, mismatched, and wrinkled as anything that ever came out of a Good Will free bin, seemed to readjust itself on the Lazarian's loose-jointed body, somehow acquiring even more wrinkles. Wrinkles especially seemed to be their fashion statement. The Lazarians around the corpse still didn't move, but I knew they were unhappy. Not just unhappy, but unhappier than they had ever been in their lives. I tried to imagine an equivalent for myself—being forced to strip naked in public seemed obvious, but I knew this was a lot more than a nudity taboo.

My gaze fell on the 'viewer. Maybe more like being exposed with one of these things? "One time," I said to Stilton. "We'd better make it a good look, then."

Thinta-ah did some fast organizing. The humans were to sit directly behind to the group in the center of the room so they couldn't possibly see their true faces while they were speaking to the 'viewer. Very simple solution—just the sort of thing that signals some major complication is

imminent.

Stilton and I found a chair for the 'viewer. He got it aimed at the first Lazarian, fiddled with the focus for a few seconds, and then turned it on. "Any time," he told the Lazarian and turned away, crowding close to me as Thinta-ah crowded close to him.

In the long pause that followed, I could hear the Lazarian removing the exoskeleton. It was a ghastly sound, like cloth ripping and I wondered if it hurt. Anything that made a noise like that seemed like it *had* to hurt.

"You a-ahsk," said Thinta-ah.

I cleared my throat. "What is your name?"

"Simeer-ah," said the Lazarian. I felt Thinta-ah stiffen.

The last syllable indicated this was some relative of Thinta-ah's, but not which kind.

"How are you connected to—"

"A-ahsk only about Entwa-ahter!" Thinta-ah practically shouted.

I hesitated, wanting to explain about establishing a pattern and knowing at the same time that Thinta-ah wasn't buying. A Lazarian's true face was exposed in the presence, if not the sight, of others, and to them, this was much more urgent than a murder. Any murder.

I could have sworn I heard Farber swallow from across the room. "Do as you're told," he called from where he stood facing the now closed door with the courier.

Behind me, the exposed Lazarian made a small noise. I'd never heard the sound before but I knew instinctively that the alien was weeping. A wave of compassion mixed with shame swept through me—not the best thing for a cop to feel during a murder investigation. If I'd felt sorry for everyone who ever cried during questioning, there'd have been a few more hardheads running free who had gotten away with murder and worse.

I took a deep breath. "What do you know about the death of Celie Entwater?"

"I a-ahm responsible."

My shamed compassion turned to cold water. "Are you saying you killed her?"

"It is my fault."

"Are you saying you killed her?" I asked again.

Stilton shrugged. "First time's a charm, I guess," he whispered.

"You strangled Celie Entwater?" I persisted.

"I ha-ahve the blaaaaaa-aimmeh."

"Stop now," said Thinta-ah, softly. "Next."

I gave up. "All right. We'll wait while you cover yourself." Damnedest thing—the exoskeleton made the same ripping-cloth sound going back on as it had coming off. My nerves felt sandpapered. And I only had to hear that

noise nineteen more times.

No, sixteen more times, I discovered after it was safe to turn around again. Stilton aimed the 'viewer at the next Lazarian. The first one looked no worse for the experience—outwardly, anyway. There was nothing like sweat or blood, the exoskeleton appeared unchanged. But the Lazarian's body looked a little more relaxed, the kind of posture you see in people who finally confess to a crime and find they're more relieved at being able to get it off their chests than they are frightened of being punished. Maybe the first time really had been a charm.

Then the second Lazarian said exactly the same thing and the world rearranged itself into the form it always took during a criminal investigation. The world is full of liars, liars who say they didn't do it and liars who say they did, liars who say they're sorry and liars who say they're not, liars who swear they've never done it before, liars who promise they'll never do it again. Apparently some things were universal—literally.

By the time the sixth one confessed, Stilton had taken over the questioning and my cynicism felt like a drug reaching toxic levels in my system. The only thing I actually listened to after number seven was that ripping-cloth sound. There was some kind of cosmic irony at work here, I thought; expose your true face and then tell a lie. Gave a deeper meaning to the term *barefaced liar*, that was for sure.

What I wasn't sure about was why it was affecting me so intensely. Maybe because I secretly suffered from the ailment of poor species self-image, believing that aliens must be truly superior forms of life to flaw-ridden humanity, and they'd shattered my illusions of their being closer to the angels. What was that old joke that had made the rounds back when the Lazarians had first arrived? An optimist thinks humans could be the highest form of life in the universe, a pessimist knows they are. Right. Try this one, I thought bitterly—an optimist thinks all beings are siblings, a pessimist knows they are. And the name of the first sibling, in any language anywhere, was Cain.

"Still awake?" Stilton asked me suddenly.

I managed not to jump at the sound of his voice. "Yeah. Just."

"Good. Last confession coming up," he said, fiddling with the 'viewer on the chair. Without my noticing, the lights in the room had come up in response to the waning daylight. Through the frosted windows, I could see that it was nearly dark. With any luck, we might get out by dawn, I thought wearily. And when we did, I was going to ask for a transfer out of homicide and go chase burglars for a while, or drug addicts or people who never paid their parking tickets.

"One more time," Stilton said, assuming the position. The sound of ripping cloth. If this one was going to lie about Entwater, too, then I hoped

it hurt.

But number seventeen was apparently the rebel in the group. “Fa-ahr-ber,” the last Lazarian said. “Fa-ahr-ber is at fault.”

“What a relief,” I said. “I was afraid sixteen Lazarians had taken turns choking someone to death. But it turns out that the man dressed like a butler did it. Can’t wait to alert the media.”

Thinta-ah suddenly came back to life and told Farber to send out for pizza. Apparently pizza was the closest thing we had to a Lazarian native dish. That didn’t cheer me, or even give me an appetite, though I knew I should have been hungry.

And thirsty. The humans were—they all looked as if they’d spent the day in a desert, except for the Pilot, who seemed as completely detached and unaffected as ever. And yet, it was the Pilot who informed us that there were new problems developing with the humans.

She came over while we were setting up the ‘viewer on a side table so we could go over the recordings. “We have people in very serious need,” she said, pointing her cigarette holder at them.

“Of what?” As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I knew the answer, but the Pilot was already telling me.

“Of toilets. Some are in real pain,” she added cheerfully. I wanted to hit her.

Instead, I talked to Farber. His response made me want to hit *him*. “Thinta-ah knows,” he said. “Arrangements were made before you got here.” He pointed at a large ornamental flower-pot in the corner. “It only looks like a flower-pot,” he added, as if reading my mind. “It’s a, ah, Lazarian waste receptacle. The Lazarians are, ah—” swallow “—*casual* about this kind of function.”

“Oh, really?” I said. “I sure haven’t seen any of *them* use it.”

Swallow. “They only need to every other week. This isn’t the week.”

I went to the humans and broke it to them myself. One of them, a middle-aged man, shook his head stubbornly without looking up at me. But a woman of about sixty shrugged, marched over to the receptacle and pointedly turned her back. The anger was almost palpable and I knew what kind of stories they were all going to tell when they were finally allowed to leave. Lazarian human diplomatic relations could well end up being harmed more by the bathroom arrangements than by a murder, I thought, going back to Stilton. Even terrorists would take their hostages to the bathroom.

Or, I thought, looking at Thinta-ah who was being careful to look anywhere but toward the corner, had humans just come that much closer to understanding the experience of exposing the true face?

Understanding? I doubted it. They’d remember it, but it wasn’t the sort of thing that would generate much empathy.

"*One* look," Thinta-ah reminded us when we were ready to look at the recordings.

"Only one," Stilton said. He had half a pizza next to him and he was feeling better, much better than the delivery person who had come into the room before we could warn her. She sat sulking with the first courier. I wondered if anyone besides the employees' families, a courier service, and a pizza parlor had picked up on the fact that there was something funny happening at the Lazarian embassy. My cellular had been strangely silent, no one calling for an update or a statement or anything at all. Maybe we were sitting under a governmental bell jar, families, courier service, pizza parlor, and all.

"I'll need to freeze each image sometimes," Stilton told Thinta-ah. "Is that all right?"

The answer was so long in coming that I thought Thinta-ah had gone to sleep standing up again. "Yes. A-ahll right. One time through."

Stilton sighed with relief, turned on the 'viewer, and picked up a slice of double shitake mushroom. The screen lit up and he dropped the pizza in his lap. If I'd had an appetite, I'd have had pizza in my own lap.

The face on the screen was Enwater's.

Stilton slammed down the freeze button. "What did you *do*?" I whispered angrily. "Did you get the focus upside down and put it on *her*?"

"You can see I didn't," he said, too spooked to be offended. "That's not the image of a dead person. That face is animated, it's moving, talking. Look at the readings." He pointed at the box on the left side of the screen. "They say living, not dead."

I looked from the screen to Thinta-ah on the other side of the table. "Could this possibly be this Lazarian's true face?"

"I maaaaaa-aiy not look," Thinta-ah said. "But wha-aht faaaa-aice you see must be the true one."

I got up and went around the table to the alien. "Listen," I whispered. "The face on that screen is—"

"Do not tell me," said Thinta-ah. "I maaaaaaaay *not* know. Wha-aht faaaaaa-aice is there is true."

I tried to think. It was hard with the heavy garlic smell drifting over from the platter next to Stilton. "Okay. The face on that screen cannot possibly belong to one of your species, but to another one entirely, and to a certain being—"

"*I maaaaaay not know!*" Thinta-ah's voice echoed in the room, not the command voice this time but a cry of anguish. Everything stopped. Over by the Rockwell-esque mural of the first meeting between human and Lazarian, Farber straightened up from a whispered conversation with the courier and pizza delivery person to glare at me.

"I'm sorry," I said to Thinta-ah and bowed. "I was...I was ignorant."

The Lazarian refused to look at me. I went back around the other side of the table and sat down next to Stilton, feeling as if I had just defiled somebody else's church with a rite from my own. And I didn't even go to church.

The association caught in my mind like a burr. *Was this religious?* Discounting hobby-killers and for-hires, people tend to take a life over matters having to do with love/sex and personal offenses, real or imagined. *Our people...but the Lazarians?*

I beckoned impatiently to Farber, who hurried over. "Can I ask Thinta-ah about Lazarian psychology?"

Swallow (of course). "No."

I groaned. "Why not?"

"You're not a psychologist. Besides, they don't actually have any."

"What are you talking about? They must. *Everybody* has psychology. *Animals* have psychology."

"Well, yes, they *have* it—" swallow "—but they don't have it as a science or a discipline or whatever you want to call it. The study of psychology is unknown on their world."

"But they must have *something*."

Farber nodded. "They do. They have true faces."

"That's a big mother's help," I said. "You want to know what true face that Lazarian on the end over there has?"

He started to protest that he wasn't allowed to look and I waved his words away.

"Never mind. You wouldn't believe it if you did see it." He started to walk away and I caught his arm. "Hey, stay close, will you? I'm working without a net here."

"We all are," he murmured.

"The verdict is in," Stilton said, sitting back. "According to the 'viewer, this alien is telling the truth."

I stared at Entwater's image on the screen, still frozen. She had been a very attractive woman; at least one of her parents had had relatives from Japan and whatever else was mixed with it had blessed her with the kind of features that age well. Damned shame they wouldn't have a chance to age any further—or would they? Did true faces age? *Supposedly*, no one knew. *Supposedly*. But someone must have. There had to be some Lazarian keeper of forbidden knowledge...didn't there?

I gave up that line of thought as futile. If there were any such Lazarians, they were most likely back on Lazarus, or La-ah- ZA-AHR-eesh, or whatever the hell it was.

"What do you want to do?" Stilton asked me. "You want me to let this

picture go and see the next?"

"Are you done looking at it?"

"Are you?" He ran a hand through his black curls. "Remember, we're never going to see it again, so make sure you've seen your fill."

"I'm not so sure about that," I said as he unfroze the image. The corresponding readings in the box were holding, waiting for the video to catch up.

"What do you mean?" Stilton said.

I pointed at the 'viewer. "That's what I mean."

I could actually see Stilton break into a sweat as Entwater's face reappeared.

"Why are you surprised?" I said. "They all *said* the same thing." I looked at Farber. "All except one."

Farber gazed back at me, swallowing without comprehension. Apparently, the last Lazarian's voice hadn't carried over to him. Or he hadn't been paying attention.

This time we ran the video concurrent with the lie detector program; I watched the face while Stilton kept track of the readings. I wanted to imprint that face on my mind. It wasn't *quite* identical to the other one, but the differences were minor—the width of the face, the length of the nose, the size of the chin. That figured—each Lazarian's head would be a different size, so the face on it would be sized to fit. The Procrustean face. No, the true face on the Procrustean head.

Stilton sighed unhappily. "This one's telling the truth, too. Or so it says here. The program must be defective, though how we'd ever be able to tell—" he sighed again.

"Keep going," I said. "Maybe we'll see a variation somewhere."

Stilton gave me a dirty look. "Yah."

"We've already seen some." I leaned close and whispered. "That face isn't completely identical to the first one. There are variations, almost too minor to see, but they *are* there. What about the readings?"

He called back the first set for comparison. "You're right. But the variations are all physiological. They have two pulses, and they have respiration and skin temperature and they show the same degrees of variation from one Lazarian to another that we show one human to another. In all standard healthy people, anyway."

"So let's see if maybe someone *isn't* standard healthy."

Now he almost smiled. "I like you better than I used to, all of a sudden," he said and focused his attention on the 'viewer again.

But of course, I had just been overly optimistic. Entwater's face appeared, confessed, disappeared, and reappeared over and over without any telling variations. That *was* probably telling, except we couldn't

understand *what* it was telling.

At least the seventeenth Lazarian looked like Farber. I took great consolation in the fact that my certainty had been correct. It didn't make up for the fact that the 'viewer said that Lazarian was also telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, but you can't have everything.

"The program's got to be defective," Stilton said, replacing Farber's facsimile with the seventeen readings. "We might as well switch programs, record all the humans, and then get comfortable in our new home. We're going to be here quite a while and we might as well get over our potty shyness as soon as possible."

"No," I said, standing up and looking at Thinta-ah. Farber took a step toward me and Stilton rose to his feet in response, moving to protect my left.

"I understand your feelings about the toilet," he said, "but don't go losing your head over it now."

"I mean no, the program's not defective, not no, I won't use the toilet." I went over and stood as close as possible to the Lazarian, who didn't move away. "The program's *incomplete*. We don't have a control."

"A what?" said Farber suspiciously.

"A control," I said, staring up at Thinta-ah. "A standard to measure the other Lazarians against."

Stilton practically jumped over the table.

"Same arrangements as for the other Lazarians," I said.

"Thinta-ah, it's your turn in the barrel."

"It's already been Thinta-ah's turn," said Stilton, sounding scared.

The Lazarian lunged past me for the table, but Stilton already had the 'viewer in his arms. "Back off," he said, moving away, "or I'll turn this around and show everyone in the room what's on the screen."

Stretched out across the table, Thinta-ah hesitated and then straightened up slowly. "You maaaaaaaay not see."

"I've seen," Stilton said. "You didn't say every Lazarian but you."

"No. I did *not*." Thinta-ah backed away from the table but Stilton didn't budge. Instead, he beckoned me over and pulled the 'viewer away from his chest.

Thinta-ah had apparently been either the consummate diplomat or completely undecided. His true face was a grotesque mixture of Entwater's and Farber's. What made it grotesque was not that it had a patchwork aspect but that it was fluid—as if his features had been in the process of melting or flowing from one face to the other and somehow frozen in mid-change.

"I punched to create a control file and the 'viewer informed me that one already existed," Stilton said as I studied the screen. "So I called it up and *olé*."

"*Voilà*," I corrected him.

"In this case, I'd say it rates an olé. But I should have realized it would be here. It was how Entwater created the program, by using Thinta-ah as a control. He must have been teacher's pet. Diplomat's pet. Whatever."

"Freeze it and let's hear the audio," I said. "Unfreeze it when the video and audio are in synch."

A voice that had to be Entwater's came out of the small speaker. "What is your name?"

"Thinta-ah."

"Are you from another planet?"

"Yesss."

The image on the screen came to life. There were a few more questions. Favorite Earth food? Pizza with heavy garlic in the sauce—true. Last eaten yesterday? No—a lie. It was all very disjointed but light stuff, like a dating service application, slightly adapted. But it had served the purpose—the readings were clear. Stilton let it run out, and then put all the readings on the screen together, the seventeen and Thinta-ah's.

"God-damn-it," he said and blew out a disgusted breath. "Or maybe we should have known that, too—that if there was a control, then the program stands. They're all telling the truth, or they're the best liars in the universe."

"You're right."

We both jumped and Stilton almost dropped the 'viewer. The Pilot had managed to come right up to us without either one of us knowing. "Right about what?" said Stilton.

She pointed a finger at him, smiling. "You seek the truth. And you—" she swiveled toward me, finger still pointing "—seek the lie."

"What do you seek?" I said, making sure that Thinta-ah wasn't sneaking up on my side.

"Resonance, with all that is. Did you hear the one about the Pilot who went up to the hot-dog-o-mat and said, 'Make me one with everything?'"

"That joke is so old, it's got a long grey beard and a brand-new liver," Stilton said, eyes narrowing. "It's at least half a century since the first time someone told it, and it wasn't a Pilot—"

"It is now."

That wasn't a happy expression, I realized—it was a *serene* one. It was the kind of expression you saw on people who were sure they had all the answers, minus the vacancy of the hardcore cult convert. What was Resonance, anyway? Something about traveling point to point and finding alignment so that two points that seemed to be separated by a great distance actually weren't...or something. It didn't make any sense to me, but a Pilot was one more thing I wasn't. If I couldn't figure out how it worked, I sure couldn't figure out why it made her so peaceful.

"The Lazarians taught us Resonance," she said, nodding at me. "And to

travel point to point in space, we must travel point to point in here, too.” She pointed her finger at her own forehead now. “You don’t have the correct alignments in here, so you cannot travel point to point, but point to off-point. Dead end. Wander forty years in the desert and not get out even then.”

She made us sit down again while she perched on the edge of the table, placing the ’viewer next to her. “They are all telling the truth, and they are the best liars in the universe that you have ever met, because the truth they tell is *their* truth.”

It was one of the few times in my life that I could say I had experienced *satori*. And once I saw it, I felt like a total fool for not seeing it to begin with. Most humans couldn’t beat the ’viewer because no matter how much they believed in their own lies, they knew what they believed was at variance with facts that other people knew, and so both couldn’t be true. But the Lazarians were aliens, so of course their concept of the truth would be alien as well.

Alien truth. True faces. The two concepts were whirling around each other in my head, trying to find a basis for connection.

“So what does that mean?” Stilton said. “Somehow they all killed her, or they’re all lying to protect someone?”

The Pilot shook her head. “You don’t understand yet. They taught us Resonance with all things. Because *they* Resonate, *always*.”

I couldn’t tell if this was another *satori* or a continuation. “Entwater liked them. She liked her work.” I glanced at Farber. “And she, in turn, was very popular. So popular that—” I broke off, resting one hand casually on the ’viewer. “Tell me, was she popular because she liked them, or did she like them because she was popular?”

“That has Resonated into one thing now. It can no longer be determined because it is no longer distinguishable. All that remains is...love. *Not* the trendy brain chemicals,” she added to Stilton. “Do you Resonate love?”

“You mean, understand it?” I laughed a little. “Does anyone?”

“What do you do? For love. What does it do to you?”

For once, I was at a loss because I’d never had a long term relationship or a child. Alone, you can travel faster in a career, but you leave a lot of understanding in the dust that way, too. “Oh, I guess you care about the other person,” I said finally, feeling like a sappy greeting card.

“Yeah. And when they stop loving, they stop caring,” Stilton said gloomily. “Not responsible, all that shit.”

The Pilot’s face lit up even more. I hadn’t thought it was possible. “Responsible. *Responsible*. Are you always responsible?”

I a-ahm responsible.

It is my fault.

I ha-ahve the blaaaaaa-aimmeh.

Over and over again, sixteen times, from sixteen nearly identical true

faces. I almost laughed out loud with the revelation. "They're guilty, all right," I said. "That is, they *feel* guilty, because they felt responsible for her and they didn't prevent her murder!"

All the Lazarians gathered around Entwater's corpse turned their heads to look at me. Except one; the last one, of course.

"Pin a rose on *you*," said the Pilot and patted my hand.

"What next?"

"Trouble in Paradise," I said. "There's always trouble in Paradise, you can count on it, on any world. Because nobody can be that popular without someone getting jealous." I got up and walked toward Farber. "Someone got real, *real* jealous. *Killing* jealous."

"*No*," Farber said, enraged. "Jealous, yes, she had them all eating out of the palm of her hand practically, but I wouldn't—I *couldn't*—"

"And he didn't," said Stilton. "We haven't looked at the readings for his third recording, but I'd bet my life that they say he's as truthful as those from the other two recordings."

"I know that," I said, keeping my gaze on Farber. "He's not a good liar. Not *that* good, anyway. And he's not an alien. *And* he didn't have it quite right a minute ago—Entwater didn't have them *all* eating out of her hand, just *almost* all. *You* made a friend. One out of eighteen, not too popular, but a very, *very* devoted friend. A friend who loves you enough to be responsible for you. For your happiness. For your sadness. And for your anger and jealousy and hate."

Farber's mouth was hanging open. I turned toward Stilton. "Number seventeen's our murderer." I paused. "For a minute there, I was about to tell you to get out the cuffs, but then I remembered. Diplomatic immunity. We have to leave it up to Thinta-ah to administer any justice—poor Thinta-ah, the consummate diplomat of the Lazarian species, torn between both of them."

To my surprise, Thinta-ah didn't seem the least bit embarrassed. On a human, the body language would have screamed *pride*. Aliens; go figure.

Stilton looked from the Lazarians in the group to the Pilot and then to me. "Are you sure?"

"Think about it," I said. "If they were all to blame for not preventing her death, who was really to blame for causing it? A Lazarian in love? Or the one the Lazarian was in love with?" I turned back to Farber.

"I didn't know," he said. "I had no idea." He frowned. "How did you?"

I opened my mouth and then realized I couldn't tell him. "The truth was staring me in the face all along," I said after a long moment. "I just had to recognize it for what it was."

Farber spread his hands helplessly. "I don't understand."

"I know. But one tip before we all get out of here." I pulled him closer

by his lapel. "Quit this job. You're not suited for this kind of diplomacy. Really. I *know* this."

"I'm not a diplomat, I'm a secretary. I can get another secretarial job anywhere. But this was...exotic, exciting..."

"Give it up, Farber," I said, "or you're going to find that office politics have suddenly turned fatal on you."

That seemed to put the fear of God into him. I went back over to the table where Stilton and the Pilot were still sitting. "I'd say this means we're free to go."

"See for yourself," said the Pilot and gestured at the center of the room. The group of Lazarians around Entwater had broken formation and were moving slowly away from the corpse, clustering in smaller groups of twos and threes. Space density. As if they had to breathe each other's air or something.

"Everyone maaaaaaaay leave," said Thinta-ah, bowing to us.

"The door is now in service."

"And the truth shall set you free," Stilton muttered, committing everything in the 'viewer to long-term storage formats and then shutting it down.

"Not bad," I said. "In an awful kind of way."

"That's what the truth is supposed to do," he said stubbornly, pulling out the 'viewer strap so he could hang it on his shoulder. "That's what it's *for*. Right?" he added to the Pilot.

The Pilot folded her hands briefly. "What is truth?" She went back to the group of humans, who were all just starting to get warily up from their chairs.

I stared after her.

"What?" said Stilton.

"True faces. Celie Entwater died for human sins. Jestng Pilot."

"What?"

"Nothing, nothing. Let's get out of here."

▼

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NEW LIFE FOR OLD

Mike Resnick strikes again.

I don't know what came over him in the early 1990s—suddenly and without warning, he became Anthology Man (insert echo chamber effect here). Before he ran out of themes, I ran out of time, and when he called me up about Aladdin, I begged off. Which is one of the surest ways I know of to get an idea. I slid in under the wire with this one and he wedged it in with a shoehorn, I think.

Now, I always figured that if a djinn ever showed up bearing a wish, it would be a pre-fab, pre-set, no-substitutions kind of deal, take it or leave it—like a Saturn dealership of the supernatural.

Of course, I'll probably grow old waiting...

NEW LIFE FOR OLD

Millie looked at the two fingers of Crown Royal in the glass; only a sip was gone. Then she took a cautious sniff of the polishing rag in her left hand.

"I'm not a hallucination," the djinn said in a kindly tone. The cloud he was sitting on had taken the shape of a reclining chair and he had obligingly lowered it so that it was hovering only a few inches from the carpet. He still filled most of the living room.

"I'll be the judge of that," Millie said, putting the cloth down next to the brass lamp. "I'm seventy years old this May and I will determine what is a hallucination and what is not."

"And I am six thousand years old as of last May, and I know when I'm a hallucination and when I am not," replied the djinn, rumbling a little. His eyes twinkled with good humor.

Millie fanned the twinkles away with one hand, as if they were mosquitoes. She felt cool pinpricks where they touched her skin. "This must be it," she said, looking at her hand. "My grandmother saw things, too, right before the end. She never said what, but we all knew there was something by the way her eyes would move around. Like she was dreaming with them open. Could you hold off until I can lie down on the couch? I'd rather not be found face down on the carpet."

The djinn moved the cloud-chair so that she could get to the couch without having to walk through the footrest. "This is not 'it,'" he said as she kicked her shoes off and stretched out on the cushions. "In fact, you have a good many more years ahead of you. More than you anticipate. And of those,

quite a few you will spend in good health. That's the good news."

Millie paused in the act of arranging one of the throw pillows for her head. "Oh, yeah? So what's the bad news?"

"There is none," said the djinn. "I did not come to give you any bad news. In fact, I bring you a gift."

"Are you a hologram?" she asked suddenly.

"What?"

"A hologram. They can do that these days and don't think I don't know it, I've been to Disneyworld, I've been to Epcot Center, they're just down the highway from here. If this is some kind of new-fangled junk-mail or advertising experiment—"

"What would make you think that?" the djinn asked incredulously.

"Come on," Millie said, rolling her eyes. "After seventy years, you know all the pitches. The one about the free gift must be the oldest one in the book. Free gift with ten thousand dollar purchase. I was born at night, sonnyjim, but it wasn't last night."

The djinn gave a sigh that sounded like a whirlwind; Millie felt it stir her hair and, for the first time, began to get nervous. "This world is coming to I-don't-know-what," he said sadly. "Wonder and magic has been co-opted by the basest of interests, miracles cheapened in the name of personal gain—it makes me sad. I could weep."

She heard a splash and raised up on the couch. There was a wet spot on the carpet the size of a dinner plate; the djinn was dabbing at his eyes with a diaphanous white scarf. "Oh, please don't," she said. "When this carpet gets wet, it smells like the Everglades and it takes forever to dry out." She hesitated; he looked so mournful that she felt sorry for him, in spite of the fact that he had to be a hallucination. He looked exactly like the djinn in the old Arabian Nights movie, so he couldn't be real. "Look, I didn't ask you to come here—"

"Ah, but you did." He pointed at the antique lamp she had been polishing when he had appeared. "You summoned me by rubbing the lamp. It contains the old metal from the original lamp."

With some effort, Millie twisted a bit so she could look at it. "That? That's been in my family for, oh, I don't know. It's just one of those old things we've always seemed to have, I don't know why I kept it."

"Yes, you have roots in the Middle East, did you know that?" said the djinn conversationally.

Millie laughed. "Take off that rubber nose."

"I am not wearing a rubber nose!" the djinn said indignantly. The windows rattled.

"I meant, stop pulling my—ah, stop kidding me. Stop joking around."

"I'm not joking around," he said in a quieter voice. "You have roots in

the Middle East, take my word for it. I'm old enough to know."

"Yeah, you said. Six thousand last May. Bet you get a double Golden-Ager discount when you tell them that at PharMor."

"Far more what?" he asked.

"Never mind." She rolled over with her back to him and closed her eyes. "I'm going to sleep you off and after I wake up, I'm going to promise never to nip in the middle of the day again."

"Don't doze off. You don't want to sleep through this part," said the djinn. "I have come with a gift."

"Yeah, yeah, you said that, too." Millie giggled. "What is it, a trial subscription to *U.S. Djinn Today*?"

"No. A new life for the old."

Millie rolled back over to glare at him. "I told you not to joke around. And that one wasn't funny."

"But it would be for only one day," the djinn went on solemnly.

"What are you talking about?"

"I have come to give you the gift of one day of youth. Twenty-four hours of being young once more."

Millie stared at him and he stared back without flinching. "Right," she said after a bit and put her back to him again.

"You refuse?"

"I refuse to believe."

"Then accept, and see that it is as I say." Pause. "If it is not, no harm can come to you. But if it is, you will have one more day of youth. Is that such a bad gift? Is that not better than being reduced to a pile of ashes for disturbing a djinn's rest?"

"That what you usually do?"

"No, I am a very good-tempered djinn. There are others with dispositions not as nice."

"I thought djinns gave you three wishes," she said, rolling over again to face him. "Or did the bidding of whoever owned the lamp for as long as they lived?"

"It's complicated," said the djinn. "My powers are great but restricted by circumstance—certain events, the times, the recession—you'd have to be djinn to understand. I'm fortunate that I can give you a gift at all, and I think it's quite generous."

"A day of youth." Millie laughed a little. "And what would I do with it?"

"Anything you wanted. For twenty-four hours."

She sighed. "Right." She looked at the glass of Crown Royal, then at the lamp. "I've polished that damned lamp for years and never—well, I didn't used to nip in the middle of the day, either."

"No, you didn't. Just say yes."

“I’m tempted to. If I say no, I’ll always wonder.”

“No, you won’t. If you refuse—truly refuse—I will take the memory of the offer with me when I go. It would be unfair to leave you with such wondering.”

“How considerate of you.” Millie laughed again. “Wait, I’ve got it—I get this one day of youth and it costs me whatever time I’ve got left, right? That’s the catch, isn’t it?”

“No,” the djinn said. “It is not. Just take the day. Take the day and make the most of it. You would know how.”

“I sure would,” Millie said, more to herself.

“Then it is done. See you tomorrow!”

Abruptly the living room was empty.

“Hey!” Without thinking, she got up a little too quickly. The room darkened and began to tilt. She caught herself on the arm of the couch, cursing her blood-pressure medicine.

Then her vision cleared.

She was ready for him when he reappeared exactly twenty-four hours later. The whole bottle of Crown Royal was on the coffee table in front of the couch; she had just started working on it.

“An experiment,” she said, in response to his pointed look. “I’m going to see how far I can get with this in one sitting. Then I’m going to take the pledge.” She paused to take a long sip from the glass she was holding. “And your lamp can tarnish forever, as far as I’m concerned.”

“You were not happy?” the djinn asked in surprise.

“Happy? I was in ecstasy. You know, the aches and pains, they come on you so gradually over the years that you don’t realize how much there is, and then when it’s all gone at once—” she shook her head.

“You don’t realize how much the world has faded—or how much you’ve faded in the world, and then you’re back all at once and—” she started to take another sip of the Crown Royal and then put the glass down.

“You don’t realize how much you let get away. How much you just let go. You think there are things you don’t have room for in your life—” she sat back, gazing past the djinn in his cloudy reclining chair. Her eyes were a little too bright.

“I remember I used to say I was tired. When I was young, I mean. But I wasn’t tired. *Now* I’m tired. But then—back then, I was never tired. I didn’t know that. After you left, I ran out of here—I mean, I ran. My first experiment, you see. I ran just to feel myself running, to feel the muscles working and my heart pumping and to hear the sound of my breathing. I ran for blocks before I had to stop.

“Then I caught sight of myself in the window of a parked car and just

before I got a good look at myself, in that split-second before I really saw my own reflection, I thought, 'I must look like hell.'" She laughed. "I don't remember ever thinking that I was beautiful when I was young, I always thought there was too much of one thing, not enough of another, and so forth. Perhaps I just had bad eyesight in those days, perhaps my eyes are better now, because I can look at myself this minute and see that the beauty I had is still there. It's been added to, but it's still there. It always was."

"Go on," said the djinn.

"Go on. That's what I should have told you: go on. And you'd have gone and taken the memory of the offer with you, isn't that what you said? I went to the park, I danced around the duck pond, took off my shoes and waded with some children, sailed leaf-boats with them, fed the ducks chunks of old bread, told them stories.

"Fell in love. I have no idea who he was or where he is now. I wouldn't let him tell me his name, I wouldn't give him mine. In two hours, I knew everything I needed to know about him. Including how to live without him. He probably still doesn't know what hit him, but he'll never forget me.

"I started a dance in a supermarket. I went into an office building where I had a job once, rode the elevator to the top floor and talked to everyone who got on and off it. I went to the zoo, bought a dozen balloons and gave them away to strangers.

"After dark, I went to a hotel, rented the penthouse suite, and threw a party. I said it was my birthday. Everyone in the hotel came. When I left at dawn, they were still singing old songs together. The manager tore up the bill, said I was guest number one million and it was all on the house and by the way, Happy Birthday, young lady.

"I shared my breakfast with a kid who was skipping school. I gave her what was left of my cash and told her to go to the zoo and buy some balloons. If you're going to steal a day for yourself, I told her, make it one hell of a day to remember.

"I fell in love again before lunch. He'll never forget me, either. I bet he'll never meet another woman who'll buy him a dozen white roses." She laughed.

"And then I skipped lunch and ran all the way home without stopping. Must have been about five miles, give or take. I roamed pretty far and wide."

There was a long moment of silence. "It sounds like you had a good time then," the djinn said finally.

"Oh, it was better than that." Millie laughed again. "It was extraordinary. It was miraculous. It was everything that youth never, ever, ever really is." She looked at him from under her brows. "And we both know it. Don't we."

The djinn's expression was slightly sheepish. "I don't suppose we get

to be seventy, or six thousand, without learning a lesson or two.”

“But there are some we don’t learn until it’s—well, maybe not too late, but...almost.” She finished the Crown Royal in the glass and poured herself another three fingers.

“So now—do I say, ‘thank you’?”

“That would do.”

She put a hand over her mouth briefly. “And if I’d said no, you’d have left me without even the memory of the offer? I almost wish you had.”

“Why?” asked the djinn curiously.

“Because here’s what I really wish: I wish that you had come to me fifty years ago, when I first polished that lamp for my mother. I wish you had come to me then and said, ‘I am going to give you a gift, young girl, I am going to give you one day of age, one day of being old, so you will know what you will have then...and what you have now.’ That’s what I really wish.”

She took another sip of the Crown Royal. The djinn started to fade away, which didn’t surprise her. She sat back on the couch and closed her eyes, not wanting to watch.

“Millie?” said the djinn’s voice.

“What is it?” she said, without opening her eyes.

“I did.”

The afternoon crept away.

▼

i n t r o d u c t i o n t o
THE COMING OF THE DOLL

This is another early sale, from an idea that ambushed me during a slow afternoon at Hallmark. I jotted down an opening line, crossed it out, rewrote it and that was it. All I had to do was go home and write the whole story out, which I did; this is what emerged from my typewriter (I told you it was early).

That's the only time such a thing has happened to me. It's a pretty fair representation of some uniquely female anxieties which is probably why it occurred that way. Though anyone who happens to be a parent can probably tell this was written before I became a parent myself.

▼

The COMING of the Doll

I'm not a screamer, but I scream anyway. Once, loud and long, and when nothing happens at the end of it, I scream again, much louder and a good deal longer. And, still, nothing happens, nothing changes. There is still a charming little baby doll lying on its back in Rowena's crib with its butter-soft plastic limbs sticking up in the air and its Cupid's-bow mouth permanently puckered around a small hole meant for a baby-doll bottle. I do not touch the doll; the fingerprints of whoever took Rowena and left it in her place could be on it. I have enough presence of mind to think of that even if I am screaming.

I look at the window. It's open but I opened it myself this morning. If the kidnapper came in that way, he was careful to close the screen behind him when he left. I back out of the room slowly—nice room, decorated bit by bit all the months I was pregnant, pleasant without being icky-sweet—and run down the hall to the stairs.

Someone is banging on the front door, hard, and the doorbell is going mad, bonging so fast it can barely keep up with itself. I hesitate, clutching the rail until I hear Betty Thornton's voice calling over and over, "Sharon, are you all right? Sharon? Sharon?"

She's heard me, I realize. I screamed and she heard me. I run down the stairs, thumping, almost slipping on the carpeting and fetch up against the door. Clumsily, I paw the chain lock off and flip the deadbolt, thinking he could not have come in this way, not through the chain lock and the deadbolt. Then the door is open and Betty's mouth is moving and her eyes are blinking and she shakes me hard, even though I'm not screaming any more.

“Rowena’s gone,” I tell her. “Someone took her. Someone climbed through her bedroom window and took her.”

Betty is all in-charge and calm authority. She has three children, and she knows when to get the Band-Aids and when to call the hospital. “Are you sure?” she says, giving me a final shake to settle everything inside me back where it should be. “Are you sure she didn’t just crawl off somewhere?”

“She was having her nap in her crib,” I tell her. “She can’t crawl well enough, and even if she could, she couldn’t get out of her crib without falling. I would have *heard* her!”

This convinces Betty. She pushes me down on the sofa and goes for the telephone. She dials the police from memory—*memory*, she’s that kind of mother—and speaks quickly but clearly. When she finishes, she looks toward the stairs and then at me, and decides to stay down here.

“They’ll be here right away,” she says, sitting down and folding one arm around my shoulder. “You calm down so you can tell them what happened. I’ll be right here by you.” I ask her what about her own kids, out playing with a child-snatcher loose, and she tells me not to worry, they aren’t babies and they won’t go with strangers. I worry anyway, thinking the kidnapper must be collecting children, picturing him—yes, *him*, kidnappers have always been *hims* to me—with a large black sack of dolls. He is exchanging them for children, and now Rowena is at the bottom of the sack, suffocating under a load of squirming arms and legs, all children he has taken and replaced with dolls. Why am I thinking that? Betty dabs at my face with a tissue, and I realize I’m crying tears of fear. Tears of fear, tears of fear, my mind says over and over until the police come in the still-open front door.

I jump up. Betty restrains me from flinging myself at the uniforms. All I really see are the uniforms, deep dark blue with shiny, no-fooling badges. And guns. God bless the guns, they look so beautifully huge. They’ll shoot the man with the sack dead, and all the children will come home again. Rowena, too.

It takes both me and Betty to tell them what’s wrong. They look from one of us to the other, following the volley of our words back and forth. Then one says, “Bert, you have a look upstairs. Try to stay calm, Mrs. Petersen. Where is your husband?” I tell him I’m divorced as Bert goes up the stairs. I can see by the position of his arm that he has his hand on his gun, even though I’ve said there is no one up there. “Could her father have taken her?” the policeman asks me. I shake my head. Am I sure? I’m sure. Was there a custody fight? No, no custody fight. I am explaining that I am between jobs and living on savings with Betty interpreting the garbled spots, when Bert comes to the head of the stairs and says, “Dave, you’d better have a look at this.”

Dave looks up at his partner and sees something very, very bad,

something I have not seen, and I grab at Betty until she has to press my hands between hers. Then he looks at me and sees something even worse, and I think that the man with the sack must have dropped Rowena, dropped her out the window and killed her, and they think I did it.

We all go up the stairs, Betty and I following Dave slowly because I can't let go of her. He leads us down the hall to the cheerful-awful room. If Betty were not holding me, I would not be able to go in. But she is being brave for me, and we do go in. Bert is already back in the room, looking not out the window but down into the crib. Dave goes across the room and looks, too. Then they both turn to me and Bert says, "Mrs. Petersen, do you take drugs?"

Betty disengages herself from me and walks to the crib as though the floor were made of eggs. I stand just inside the doorway all alone now, unable to think why they are asking me if I take drugs? Drugs? *Drugs?* What have they found in Rowena's crib that I did not see? All three of them are staring at me and their eyes say they cannot believe themselves. So I go, too, across the room and look down into the crib.

The doll is still there. It hasn't moved, of course. It can't move unless I move it, and I haven't moved it because of the fingerprints.

Betty touches my shoulder the way I have seen her touch her best crystal. "See, Sharon?" she says. "Rowena must have, ah, crawled under the blanket and hid from you." Her eyes are not right, the way they're on me.

Bert—or Dave, suddenly I can no longer tell them apart—lifts the doll's little shirt with a careful finger. The afternoon sun is harsh on the plastic navel-less stomach. "About three months, is that right? She seems well-treated." He sounds dubious, but then he smiles. "Don't want to wake the little beauty. Maybe we'd better go back to the living room and, ah, thrash this out."

The other policeman—marked *Shelton*, I see for the first time, but I still don't know if it's Bert or Dave—is having trouble with his face. His mouth is sliding around and he can't decide whether he should look at me or Betty. Betty's arm slips around my shoulders and grips me firmly. "I think we should call someone first, officer," she says. "Someone to look after the baby while I stay with Sharon."

The baby? "*The baby?*" I say, looking into Betty's face. I can't believe I heard her right, but there is something she finds equally incredible of me. I can tell. Our eyes are mirrors.

Then I jump forward and yank the light summer blanket out of the crib. It's yellow, soft, with little green horses galloping all over it. "Do you see a baby hiding in this blanket?" I demand, shaking it to show there's nothing in it, nothing at all. I throw it on the floor and pick up a rattle. "Can a baby hide behind this? Or this?" I am plucking Rowena's toys out of the crib like vermin, a spongy ball, a soft plastic train, a teddy bear, and hurling them to

the floor until there is nothing on the mattress but that hideous sweet doll. I grab it up by one leg and hold it out over the floor. "Do you see a baby here?" I shout. "Do you? This is just a doll! It's nothing but a *doll*!"

The silence in the room is horrified. Then the Shelton policeman has his hands under the doll as though it were alive. He looks into my eyes and he says, so quietly, so gently, "Mrs. Petersen, please let go."

I do and now I am the horrified one, because he is holding that thing like a baby, exactly the way you should hold a baby, and its eyes are open. It's an expensive doll with eyes that fall open and closed, and brown curly hair, not just painted on, the kind you can really comb. But it could never be mistaken for a real child and it looks nothing like Rowena. Her hair is dark, yes, but not so curly and her mouth is not a frozen Cupid's-bow. But the Shelton policeman is murmuring to it, and Betty's hands are fluttering around me like pesky birds, and the other policeman is saying, "Mrs. Thornton, do you know Mrs. Petersen well enough to tell if this is her daughter?"

And Betty says—

Oh, God, Betty says—she says—

"Yes, that's Rowena. I've baby-sat her and I have three of my own. I *know* one child from another and that's Rowena."

I slap her traitorous paws away from me. How can she? How can she? Anyone can see it isn't a child! Anyone but Betty and these two awful policemen.

And then Betty is telling them all kinds of things about me, about how Rowena broke up my marriage because Jeff couldn't stand her getting all my attention and how I lost my job and blamed Rowena and Rowena got sick and I slept through her screaming and I would have gone on sleeping if Betty hadn't come by and Rowena began choking and I didn't know what to do and I use sleeping pills because I can't adjust to the divorce.

"You sneak!" I shout in her face. "You snooped in my medicine cabinet, *how dare you!*"

Betty looks hurt, like I slapped her, but she's the one who slapped me, going through my things, telling the police gossip about me, insisting this plastic thing is Rowena. They all look to each other, and I see they have decided on a common expression to use because their faces are identical when they turn to me again. The Shelton policeman gently transfers the doll they think is Rowena to Betty's arms, and I run out of the room.

I only mean to run into the hall where I won't have to watch this travesty, but the policemen holler in rough voices. They scare me so much I run down the stairs faster than before when Betty was pounding and ringing to get in. The Police are thundering down the steps after me, and that scares me even more because they are obviously deranged, mistaking a doll for my Rowena.

I'm out the screen door with them still chasing me when I realize they are not deranged at all, they are in league with the man with the sack.

And then I really run, pumping my legs for all I'm worth, across the street without looking and between two houses. My chest is burning already, I'm no jogger, but I keep going because if I stop I won't stand a chance of getting Rowena back. They'll force me to accept the doll and treat it like a baby, and I'll never see my daughter again.

Behind the houses is an alleyway where the garbage trucks go to pick up trash. I cut across the unfenced yard on the right, surprising the man standing at the barbecue with a steak speared on a long fork. I see in passing that his little boy is playing in a sandbox, moving trucks and cars around. The man with the sack wouldn't dare try to take that little boy, his father would stab him like a steak with that fork, I just know it. I don't wonder what the father thinks about the policemen chasing me across his yard. I can't think about anything except getting away and the burning that has become a squeezing wildfire in my chest. The alley is cracked and pitted with ice heaves and potholes, but I'm leaping over them and skirting around them. I'm not going to trip and fall. I'd let Rowena down if I tripped, and I'm not going to let her down this time.

At the end of the alley I see the police car pull up and stop. I veer away to the left, and almost before I know it, I leap a fence, hit the grass on my feet and keep running, glad for once all I ever wear are jeans and sneakers, nothing nicer. I pound through the yard, around the house and burst through the front gate. Then across another street, into another yard and down another alley. My knees are beginning to weaken, my thighs are shaky, and there is no oxygen in the great whoops of air I take. But I run, for Rowena. I run between the houses and down the sidewalks until the houses aren't even vaguely familiar and the penned dogs in the fenced yards snarl in deadly earnest, smelling the total stranger of me, just the way they would snarl at the man with the sack if he came here. When I finally pound to a stop, my whole body jarred with each slowing step and my chest rising and collapsing like crazy bellows, when I bend over coughing with my trembling hands on my watery knees, no one comes up behind me to say I'm under arrest. I am alone. I have outrun the police. All for Rowena. I see now that it's true that maternal instinct enables a woman to perform superhuman feats. By outrunning the police I have just performed one. Because I am a good mother and have the maternal instinct. I could chew through solid steel to get to my child. I could lift ten thousand pounds if my child were under them. I could sprout wings and fly to the moon if my child were stranded there. I would never let her lie for hours in dirty diapers while I slept knocked-out on sleeping pills. A doll perhaps, but not Rowena.

I look around as my breath comes back, but there are still no police in

sight. It is a miracle that they don't know where I am. I'm standing on the sidewalk of a street not very unlike my own. I wonder if the babies on this street will grow up to go to school with Rowena after I get her back. Across from me is the edge of the park, where older children go to play on the swings and the seesaws and hang upside-down on the jungle gym, or just run around on the grass or climb on the picnic tables. The man with the sack would love to come here and carry off unattended children, leaving dolls lying on the ground for their grieving mothers to find later. It occurs to me he is there now, wandering through the park with his sack. I will find him and grab that sack away from him and wrestle Rowena out of it. Then I'll run home and show them, all of them, the policemen and that gossipy Betty Thornton and the man with the fork, that my Rowena couldn't possibly be that doll.

I go quickly across the street and into the park, down a grassy slope to the picnic table area. The swings and seesaws and jungle gym are further on. I can hear the children playing on them. I'm heading straight for the voices when I see the woman sitting reading at the picnic table with the doll standing nearby.

I can't help it. I have to stop when I see the doll. It's three feet high and its skin is too pink to be real, its cheeks too plump, the golden banana curls too perfect. Yes, I recognize it now, from when I was a little girl. It's a Shirley Temple doll, left there by the man with the sack. He has exchanged it for the real little girl while her mother was reading, and the real little girl is now in the sack with Rowena and the other children. And then I realize that this doll he has left is *my* doll, *mine*.

I take a step toward it. The woman closes her book with a snap and stands up. "Time to go home, Denice. Daddy'll be home any time now and he wants his supper when he wants it."

The doll just stands. Of course it doesn't answer. It just smiles and holds its arms out as though it were a real little girl who wanted a hug. But it isn't. The woman doesn't seem to know this.

"Don't one-more-minute me, we've been out here for hours, let's go!" She grabs the doll's arm and begins dragging it away across the grass. The doll bumps along clumsily and after a few steps the woman stops. "Pick up your feet, can't you? You're wearing down your shoes and they cost a goddamn fortune!" She gives the doll an angry yank. I put my hands over my face and turn away. This is too horrible. The woman doesn't know her little girl is gone. She has no maternal instinct, not like me.

I force myself to walk in the other direction. It's too late for her. If I find her little girl when I get Rowena back from that awful man with the sack, I will keep her myself. I'll tell the police she's my niece or my cousin. I won't let them take her; they don't know the difference between a real girl and a doll, either.

Almost to the swings, I stop again. There is a little girl, a *real* little girl sitting on the grass, playing with a doll. I have to rub my eyes because the afternoon light makes the doll almost—*almost*, not quite—look like a baby. But it's stiff, with straight blonde hair that is obviously fake, like a bad wig. The little girl is holding it and talking to it as though it were a baby, the way little girls play. I think, how sweet, and then, no, *no*. Little girls shouldn't play just with dolls. They should have other toys so they won't be stereotyped, so they won't be fooled into thinking they have the maternal instinct if they really don't have it. When I get Rowena back I'll let her have only one doll. Just one. So she won't get fooled, like—

The little girl suddenly holds the doll up and says, "Alice Ann, you're a bad, bad girl!" And then for *no reason* she lays the doll across her lap and spansks her!

I rush over. "Stop it! What has she done for you to punish her this way?"

The girl looks up at me. She is a solemn little thing of eight or nine. I hope Rowena will be much happier when she's that age and not spank the one doll I give her.

"Who're you?" the girl asks. Her hand still hovers over that poor, no, plastic bottom. I squat down and pick the doll out of her lap, straightening its clothes and stroking its hair. It's a very pretty doll, though nowhere near as pretty as Rowena. Not even as pretty as the doll that the man with the sack left in its, *her* place. This doll has only painted eyes that stay open even during naptime. Painted eyelashes, too, and raggedy hair. But it's pretty because it's a baby. A baby doll.

"I'm a mommy," I tell the girl. "A real mommy with a real baby."

"Where is it?"

"*She*. She's—" I could almost choke this brutal little brat, but then I see she's not really unkind, just thoughtless. She lacks the maternal instinct. Her little face is innocent. "She's not with me right now. I'm on my way to get her. You should treat your baby much gentler. She's only a little tiny girl and she can't take spankings yet." When I get Rowena back, I'll never spank her unless she's really, *really* bad. That's not going to be till she's much older, naturally.

The girl takes the doll away from me and holds her possessively. Holds her all wrong, too. "Not like that," I say. "You'll hurt her. Hold her like this, with your arm supporting her little head. There. That's right. Make a cradle of your arms." The girl is watching me with suspicion, but I don't care. They're all suspicious at that age. Except I hope Rowena won't be. "You know, a terrible thing can happen if you don't treat your baby right."

"Like what?" she challenges. She doesn't believe me.

"Well," I say, being patient as all good mothers are, "my mother told me a long time ago that if I wasn't a good girl, a man with a great big black sack

would come and he'd put me in the sack and in my place he'd leave a—" No. That isn't right. I know it isn't because I'm not in the sack. "If you're not good to your little girl," I begin again more confidently, "a man with a great big black sack will come and take your baby away and he'll leave a doll in her place. You wouldn't want that to happen, would you?"

The girl looks down at the doll and up at me again. "But Alice Ann is a doll. She's not a real baby."

"In that case, you'd better be extra good to her," I warn, "or the man with the sack will come and he'll take the doll and leave a real baby behind. And real babies are an awful lot of trouble to take care of, much more trouble than dolls. Do you know any lullabies?"

She only knows "Rockabye Baby." We are halfway through our third time singing it when the police finally catch up with me.

It has taken a lot of fast talking, but they haven't locked me up. I could tell they didn't really want to as we rode back to my house in the patrol car. The police are very busy and don't lock someone up just because she has the maternal instinct. That isn't a crime. I didn't tell them about the man with the sack, though, and I guess that is a crime, but they'd never find him anyway. Only mothers can find him, mothers who really have the maternal instinct, and babies.

When we came home, I went straight into the house and found Betty sitting in the living room in my rocking chair, rocking the doll. The sight of her with it in her arms made me so tired. I didn't argue with her. I just took the doll from her and held it exactly the way she did. Then I sat down in the rocking chair and I rocked the doll. Betty talked to the policemen for a long time, but I didn't pay any attention. I just stared at the doll, moving it up and down so its eyes opened and closed more like a real child's would. The policemen finally went away but Betty stayed. She called her husband and then she sat down on the couch and watched me. She's still sitting there and she's still watching me, but not as closely as she was. She keeps looking at the electric clock on the TV set, like she's waiting. Well, I'm waiting, too. The front door is still open and the daylight is fading through the screen. After Betty leaves, I'm going to let the front door stay open like that, with the screen door unlocked. I have an idea.

If I'm very, very good to this doll and demonstrate that I really do have the maternal instinct by changing her diapers right away and not sleeping through her crying, the man with the sack might come back and return Rowena. It's a chance. I could have been wrong, back there in the park. Maybe if you're good to your doll, the man with the sack comes and gives you a real baby. Maybe he'll come this evening. I'm going to expect him. Betty acts like she's expecting someone herself. Couldn't be him, though.

Betty always had the maternal instinct. It's inevitable after three kids, I bet.

But I've had only Rowena, and I didn't have her very long. Nonetheless, I know I have the maternal instinct, too. I'll prove it with the doll.

And yet, that could be a problem, I think to myself, moving the doll up and down. The eyes open and close. Open and close. Click-click. Click-click. Dolls never cry. How will I know when she's hungry? How will she tell me?

▼

i n t r o d u c t i o n t o
THE POND

I don't swim.

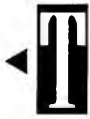
I can, but I don't. I won't. When my friends ask why, I usually make a joke about how 20 million years ago, we crawled out of the water onto the land and I don't care to go back. But the truth is, I know—I know in my gut—that if you go into the water, you die.

I know this because it happened to one of my playmates when I was a kid. He went off to swimming lessons and never came back. Horrifyingly, no one missed him until his mother met the returning bus. A year later, I failed my own swimming test when I refused to jump off a wall into water where I couldn't see the bottom. "Smart girl," said my mother when she came to pick me up. "Remember that when you get interested in boys."

But I failed at the Y, too, where you could see every inch of the bottom from end to end. It wasn't a matter of what you could or couldn't see—it was being in the water.

Eventually, I deigned to learn to swim well enough to save my own life should I fall, sans lifejacket, out of one of the fishing charters I spent so much time on catching flounder off Cape Cod. Loved deep-sea fishing, never a bad moment. Boats on the water were OK. You in the water—forget about it.

THE POND



he pond was evil.

That was a sad, silly thought to have on such a beautiful May afternoon with the trees whispering in the fresh wind and the distant sounds of insects buzzing and birds singing coming to her dreamily from the small woods that cupped the pond like protective hands. The pond itself was lovely, smooth and untroubled today, reflecting the surrounding trees like dark glass. Occasionally ripples appeared here and there on its surface, spreading out from tiny points where something had pricked the water. It should have been an idyllic spot.

Paula Stromsted leaned back on her palms and looked at her five-year-old daughter Richie, who was trying unsuccessfully to weave a garland of the flowers and leaves wilting in a pile between her folded legs. She had seen a picture of fairies dancing with wreaths of flowers around their heads in a storybook and the idea had captivated her. The girl worked meticulously with the tremendous concentration only the very young seemed capable of. After a few moments, she felt her mother's gaze on her and looked up.

"Mommy, I just can't get them to go in a circle like in the book. They won't stay." She wrapped two daisy stems around each other and grimaced when they fell apart. "See?"

Paula sat up, brushing her hands on her jeans. "Well, what do you say we head back to Grandma's house for something cold to drink? We've been down here for almost an hour and I'm getting thirsty."

"Do we *haveta*?" Richie looked longingly at the pond. "It's so nice here. This is my favoritest spot in the whole world."

"I thought Funland was your favoritest spot in the whole world."

"It's a different favoritest," Richie said seriously. "Can we stay one more mimit?"

"Minute."

"Minute. Please, Mommy?"

She sighed. "Just one. Then we go back to the house and no arguments, OK?"

"Well, OK." The girl got up and went looking for more flowers, bending over with her hands on her knees in a perfect imitation of her grandmother inspecting the vegetable garden. Paula felt a little guilty. How was a little girl to understand the way she felt about the pond? To Richie, it was what it was—a pretty lake, a place to play and daydream, a welcome change from their cramped apartment in the city and the tiresomely cheerful daycare center where she spent the hours Paula was at work. For Paula, it was something else.

Dare you. Double dare you.

Darers go first.

She closed her eyes. That day twenty-five years ago had been warm and beautiful, too, when she and her cousin Jeffrey had come down to the pond to play Robin Hood. She and Jeff didn't always get along very well—there was something cold and mean in the bright blue eyes that grownups were always exclaiming over, much to her Aunt Kitty's proud delight. *Hasn't he got the most beautiful blue eyes?* people would say. For some reason, they never saw the meanness that was waiting to come out later as a painful twisting pinch on Paula's arm or a foot stuck out to trip her when she was running or the slow, thorough dissection of a grasshopper while the tormented creature scrabbled its remaining limbs helplessly in the air. But she had seen it. Her mother had seen it, too, and wasn't happy about it. But Jeff was her only sister's boy, she'd told Paula, and they had to try to be nice to him. Maybe if he saw how people were supposed to behave, he'd try harder to be good and the meanness inside of him would shrink away to nothing. Paula had tried, but privately she felt that Jeffrey would always be a nasty little boy even after he'd grown up. And people would still be oohing and ahing over his beautiful blue eyes.

She hadn't wanted to come down to the pond with Jeffrey that day. But he was just there for the weekend with Aunt Kitty and Uncle Rob and there wasn't anyone else around to play with. Jeffrey had seemed a little nicer than usual but as soon as they'd gotten to the pond, he'd started making fun of her. She was a girl; girls were stupid and weak and scared of everything; he was going to catch a snake and scare her with it.

She wasn't scared of anything, she'd insisted, and there weren't any snakes anyway.

Are so, fraidy-cat. She could almost hear his voice, just as plain as anything, his childish, mocking treble, the way she had heard it twenty-five years before when they'd been eight years old. *Are so. There's snakes in that pond. If you're not scared of 'em, I dare you to swim in it.*

Steadfastly, she had shaken her head. He knew as well as she did that they weren't even supposed to go wading. Her father had warned them they could get sick from the water, which was murky and muddy. As well, the bottom was treacherous, parts of it suddenly dropping down ten feet or more without warning. But Jeff had kept after her. *I dare you. Double dare you.*

Darers go first, she'd said primly.

And then he had spotted her new watch that her father had bought her as a No Special Reason surprise. Jeff's parents never gave him No Special Reason surprises and he was very jealous. She'd taunted him a little about it; she couldn't help it. At last she had something she could lord over him. She should have known better, her mother had told her later. She should have realized she couldn't get the better of Jeffrey's meanness.

He had demanded that she hand the watch over. When she wouldn't, he chased her, tackled her, and tore the watch from her wrist. Paula still remembered her enraged frustration as, still sitting on her chest, he began to put it on his own wrist. Then he saw the picture of Cinderella on the dial.

A stupid girl's watch! Shoulda known it would be a stupid girl's watch! But he wouldn't give it back to her, no matter how much she demanded and pleaded. He got up off her and went down to the edge of the pond. *Let's see if it's waterproof.* Before she could stop him, he had lobbed it almost halfway across the pond. There was only a tiny splash when it hit the water and the ripples it made were soon gone.

Now you'll have to swim in the pond if you want to get your stupid watch back. Dare you to. Double dare you.

Paula had run home crying, knowing with bitter satisfaction as she sobbed and hiccupped out her story that Jeffrey was really going to get it for this one. He must have known it, too, she'd realized later, and it hadn't made the slightest difference to him. The pleasure of the act outweighed the consequences for him and that had frightened her. She could still see him as he had been, standing at the water's edge grinning nastily at her, enormously pleased with himself. The mental image chilled her. It was almost as if he was there still, standing in that exact spot and if she opened her eyes she would see him, still eight years old and every bit as nasty, daring her to jump in and get her watch.

The wind rustling the trees died down and a quiet settled over everything. Paula opened her eyes. A small figure was standing at the water's edge, leaning forward and peering curiously into the pond.

"Richie!" Paula jumped up. "Richie, get away from there!" She hurried

over and jerked the little girl back from the water.

"What? I didn't do anything!" Richie stared up at her with round, startled eyes.

Paula pressed her lips together, suddenly embarrassed. "I know, honey," she said after a moment, stroking the child's soft fair hair. "I just don't want you to go near the water. I've told you that before, remember?"

Richie nodded. "I just thought I saw something in there. Something shiny."

"You were wrong," Paula said firmly. "Come on now, let's go back to the house." She didn't look over her shoulder at the pond as she and Richie walked up the road.

"Did you and Richie have a nice walk?" Paula's mother asked as they sat in the kitchen drinking lemonade at the round wooden table.

"We ended up down at the pond. As usual," Paula said. "She likes that place so much."

Her mother pursed her lips. "It's a pretty spot."

"Yes. She seems quite drawn to it. She's made me take her down there every day." Paula half-rose from her chair to look out the window over the sink. Richie was in the back yard picking dandelions, presumably to try her luck at making a garland of them.

"You don't sound very happy about that."

"Why should I be?"

"Paula, that was such a long time ago." Her mother's voice was gentle but Paula could detect a small hint of exasperation.

"I know, Ma, but I can't go there without thinking of that little bastard. That little sadist." Paula rested her head on her hand, digging her fingers into her dark, shaggy hair. "I know it's an awful thing to say. But I'm not sorry. I never was. There was something terribly wrong with Jeff. Aunt Kitty and Uncle Rob refused to see it. Not Rob so much as Kitty, really. She thought the sun just rose and set on her darling Jeffrey."

Her mother sighed, folding her wrinkled hands around her glass. "Kitty had a lot of trouble delivering Jeffrey. It almost killed her and she never could have any more children. That was the saddest part, I thought." She sighed again and gave Paula a pained smile. "That was all Kitty had, being Jeffrey's mother. It wasn't like it is today for women. All Kitty ever really thought of doing was raising a family. When she could only have Jeff, she put a tremendous load on him. He had to be the best of every child she couldn't have. I think that may have helped make him the way he was."

"Maybe. I think he was born that way like some people are born deformed. Only his deformity was up here." Paula tapped the side of her head. "Things turned out for the best, Ma. I thought so then and I'll always

think so.”

Her mother raised her eyebrows, dipping her salt-and-pepper head slightly to the left. “I find it a bit disconcerting that after twenty-five years, you’re still so bitter about the boy.”

“It’s the pond.” Paula rubbed the back of her neck tiredly. “It’s tainted now. Jeffrey polluted the place so that it’ll never be the same. Whenever I go there, it seems like he’s still around. I can almost feel him there. Hell, I *can* feel him there. His poison’s seeped into everything, the water, the trees, the wind—” She made a face. “I sound crazy, don’t I?”

“Obsessed. Perhaps you shouldn’t go to the pond any more.”

“Perhaps I shouldn’t.” Paula sipped her lemonade. It had gone warm and the taste was sourly cloying. “But Richie would be so disappointed. And I certainly don’t want her going down there alone. If something happened, I’d never forgive myself.”

“Sometimes I don’t think you *have* ever forgiven yourself.”

Paula blinked. “Say again?”

“I don’t think you’re really glad about what happened. You’re not that kind of person. At least I hope you’re not. I think maybe the little girl inside you still takes Kitty’s awful words to heart and keeps them there.”

“Oh, for God’s sake.” Paula got up and dashed her lemonade into the kitchen sink with a flip of her wrist. She glanced out at Richie, who was squatting on the grass with her back to the house. “Ma, I *don’t* blame myself for what happened. I never did. If you want to know the truth—” she turned away from the window—“I don’t even feel guilty about not feeling guilty. It might have been me instead.”

Her mother shook her head. “If you ask me, that’s what’s poisoning the pond for you. You were talking a little while ago about Jeffrey being abnormal, not quite right. What about the way you keep harping on this? You insist on working yourself up about it. If you could stop living in the past, you’d be a lot better off.”

“I don’t live in the past.”

“When it comes to Jeffrey, you do. He hasn’t been around to make you unhappy for a quarter of a century but you’ve managed to keep him closer to you than ever. You use him to make yourself miserable.” Her mother pushed away from the table. “If you continue this way, you’d better think about getting some help because it’s going to turn you into a sad case.”

She left the room, her footsteps loud on the hardwood floor. Paula turned back to the window. Her mother had never known what it was like to be at Jeff’s mercy. That was the sort of thing that could really leave a mark on a person. She fixed herself a glass of ice water to get the taste of the lemonade out of her mouth. If only she could rid herself of the taste of Jeffrey as easily. She leaned against the counter, sipping her water thoughtfully.

She had found the grown-ups sitting at the kitchen table playing whist when she had come home wailing from the pond. Through her tears she had seen each of their reactions, Kitty putting her hand to her mouth, Rob throwing his cards down, her mother looking to her father, who got up to wipe her tears away with his handkerchief. *That boy*, Rob had said angrily, *that boy is going to have to learn a few things.*

Now, Rob, don't hit him. Kitty, sounding syrupy about Jeff as usual. *Striking a child doesn't teach him anything.*

Her parents had kept quiet except to try to comfort her. Not long after, Jeff had come in and there'd been a scene, mostly Kitty shouting at her husband while shielding a smirking Jeff with her body. In the end he'd gotten a mild spanking, after which Kitty brought him to Paula so he could deliver an apology and promises to pay for the watch out of his allowance and never to do such an awful thing again, all of it dictated to him by Kitty and played back with occasional prompting.

Paula had stared at him through the whole thing until he got to the end. He smirked all the way through it. She knew all the adults were looking at her, waiting for her to be very grown-up and ladylike about everything and accept the artificial apology. But a devil had gotten into her and instead of pronouncing her forgiveness, she had reared back and exploded.

I'll never forgive you! she had screamed into his face, startling him so much that his smirk had actually disappeared for a few seconds. *I hate you and I wish you were dead!*

Kitty had clutched her son to her side in horror while Paula's father—a bit reluctantly, it seemed to her at the time—marched her upstairs to her room and told her to stay there until after supper. Paula had known her outburst would strain relations between the two families even further, but she hadn't cared. Or had tried not to. Later, her mother had had a quiet talk with her on the virtue of being civilized and not sinking to a certain other person's level. Her father had been more understanding; he tucked her in with a promise to teach her how to defend herself.

The next morning the situation had escalated into frenzy when Kitty discovered the front door open and Jeffrey missing. Sometime during the night or early morning, he'd gotten dressed and run away. Because of what Paula had screamed at him, Kitty said. He had run away because his feelings were hurt. Paula had doubted it.

Rob and her father had driven all over the county looking for him while Kitty sobbed and she hid in her room. It was just after lunchtime when the phone rang. Paula's mother had answered it.

She couldn't quite remember the exact sequence of events after that, or exactly when she had found out what had happened and from whom. Her father had stopped at the pond on the way back to the house and found

Jeffrey's shoes and socks near the water. He and Rob had called the police from the grocery store down the road. The police had come out with a diver and several men to comb the woods, but the diver found him after all, lying at the bottom of a seven-foot drop-off.

Kitty had had to be sedated but Paula heard her screams through the whole house before the medication took effect. Paula had done it to Jeffrey. Paula had said she would never forgive him so Jeff had gone out to the pond to try to get her watch, just so they could be friends again. And it was Paula's curse that had done it. She had wished him dead and now he was.

Paula had found herself strangely numbed by the whole experience. She felt a little regret and a certain amount of horror for how the boy had died. But through it all she couldn't shake the thought that if Jeff had really been trying to retrieve her watch, it was only because he hadn't wanted to give up part of his allowance to pay for it.

But that hadn't been why he'd gone out to the pond.

Dare you. Double dare you, he'd said.

Darers go first, she'd replied.

And so he had. So that the next time they were away from the grown-ups, he could say he'd gone into the pond and then try to force her into the water. And when he'd gotten her there...

Paula came slowly back to the present and shoved the memory aside. Her mother was right. She was rubbing salt in wounds that should have healed over at least two decades before. Even Kitty had apologized to her, months after the funeral Paula hadn't attended, telling her she hadn't meant all the awful things she'd said. But the apology had had a curious flat sound to it, as though it had been fed to her the way she had fed Jeffrey's to him. But it didn't seem right, when Paula thought about it, that her feelings about Jeffrey should still be so strong. The image of the pond appeared in her mind and she felt herself tense. Jeffrey was the pond to her now and always would be. Well, she could help herself by refusing to dwell on it, starting right at that moment. She looked out the window again. Richie was still crouched down on the grass, studying something. Paula smiled. At least one good thing had come out of the experience. The memory of Jeff's death had persuaded her to take Richie for toddler swimming lessons at the Y before she was even three years old. She had decided there wasn't going to be another accidental drowning. The girl could swim like a little fish. Still smiling, she went out to see what her daughter was so involved in.

"What's up, buttercup?" she asked, ruffling Richie's hair.

Richie looked up at her guiltily. There was a pile of dandelions beside her and grass smears on her knees. Something small and brown wriggled between her fingers.

"Richie!" Horrified, Paula slapped the grasshopper out of her daughter's

grasp and stamped on it. Then she yanked the girl to her feet and shook her. "What were you doing?"

Richie tried to shrink away. "Nothing, Mommy, I—"

"That's a terrible thing to do, a terrible, evil thing! How would *you* like it if a giant tore *you* apart bit by bit! How could you? How *could* you?"

Richie flopped back and forth in her hands. "Mommy, you're hurting!"

"See? See what it's like?"

"I only caught him, I was only looking at him—"

Paula's grip tightened on the child's arm. "Don't ever let me see you doing anything like that again!"

Richie burst into tears. "I didn't do anything! I was just looking at him and you killed him! You killed him!"

Paula released her and the girl fled into the house, wailing for her grandmother. Uncertainly, Paula watched her go and then looked down at the crushed insect in the grass. With her shoe, she mashed the remains into unrecognizability and kicked the dying dandelions over them.

"You know," Paula's mother said, looking up from the magazine on her lap, "little kids don't really know that kind of thing is wrong. If, indeed, that's what she was doing. She may have been just looking at the grasshopper like she said."

Paula looked away from the television program she hadn't really been able to concentrate on and shifted her position in the overstuffed chair. "Maybe she was. But I recognized that position, the way she was holding her fingers. It was the way Jeffrey looked when he was pulling those poor things apart."

"Paula, really. Jeffrey again. And all over a *bug*."

"Really yourself, Ma. Suppose it were a puppy or a kitten?"

Her mother leaned against the arm of the couch and put her feet up on the cushions. "Richie would never do anything like *that*."

"Not anymore, that's for sure."

Her mother made a disgusted noise and set her magazine aside. It was this week's *Rolling Stone*, Paula noted with detached amusement. "You scared that poor kid almost into hysterics. And over nothing! *All* little children are fascinated by insects. Pulling them apart is just a way for them to try to figure out how they work. Like an experiment. It's curiosity, Paula, not sadism."

"It's sadistic, whether they realize it or not. I'm not going to stand for that. Richie is going to realize that other living things are entitled to exist unmolested."

"I suppose *you* never did anything of the sort," her mother said sarcastically.

"Did you ever catch me at it?"

"It's occurred to me that there was probably a good deal that I didn't catch you at."

"Well, I never did anything like that."

"Never? Not even once? Never picked the wings off a fly? Or a ladybug?"

"No." Paula suppressed the memory of watching Jeffrey with horrified fascination when she had first seen him removing the hind legs of a grasshopper. What he had done after that had made her feel sick.

Her mother shrugged. "All right. You were good and kind and merciful, a sensitive little soul who never harmed a fly. If you insist." She picked up the magazine again and leafed through it to find her place. "But I still think your reaction was entirely inappropriate, no matter what Richie was doing or not doing."

"I am *not* going to have her turn out like Jeffrey."

"Jesus Christ!" Her mother slammed the magazine down on her knees. "Jeffrey, Jeffrey, Jeffrey! I had less of him when he was alive! Once and for all, Paula, lose this hang-up you've got about him. He's dead. Twenty-five years dead. Lay him to rest!"

Paula said nothing, turning her gaze back to the television set. The images on the screen made no sense at all to her.

"You only have a few more days of vacation left," her mother went on quietly. "Try to make them pleasant. For Richie's sake. And you ought to go up to her room right now and apologize to her." She looked at Paula sharply from under her eyebrows. "Believe me, it's far more important for grown-ups to apologize to children than vice-versa. That is, if you really want a kid to grow up with the kind of integrity you want her to have."

"All right," Paula said resignedly. "I'll go up and talk to her."

Her mother was smiling as Paula walked out of the living room and into the front hall. At the foot of the stairs she paused, frowning at the open front door. The dying sunlight made a red-gold block on the floor. The screen door wasn't even latched. Paula shook her head. An authority on children and a subscriber to *Rolling Stone* and her mother still couldn't remember to lock the front door at night. Anyone could get in...

She froze in the act of closing the heavy wooden door. Anyone could get in—or out.

"Richie!" she yelled, pounding up the staircase. "Richie!" She tore down the hallway on the second floor and burst into her daughter's room. "Richie!" She didn't have to turn on the light to see the empty bed, still neatly made. "*Richie!*"

She pounded back down the stairs, colliding with her mother at the bottom.

“What’s wrong? What did she do?”

Paula pushed her mother’s groping hands away from herself. “She ran away, she’s not in her room!”

“Have you looked in the back y—”

“*You* look! I *know* where she is!” Paula ran out the front door, feeling her pocket for her car keys.

“Where are you going?” her mother called after her.

“The pond!” Paula jumped into the car and fumbled the key into the ignition, ignoring her mother’s plea to wait.

It took her just a little over a minute to drive to the pond. She knew that was the only place Richie could have run to. To her favoritest spot, because she was angry and she knew she wasn’t supposed to go there by herself. Paula forced herself to press lightly on the accelerator, in case the girl suddenly appeared walking in the middle of the road. “Richie,” she moaned, her hands trembling on the steering wheel. “Richie, if I catch up to you—” Her heart thudded when she realized what she’d said.

When she reached the pond, she pulled on to the dirt shoulder and put on the emergency flashers. “Richie!” she yelled, running the fifty yards down to the spot where they’d been sitting earlier. “*Richie!*” Her voice echoed, shattering the quiet. A few feet from the water she stopped, listening for the sound of an answer. The trees rustled, patchy silhouettes against the darkening sky.

“Richie, please answer me! I’m not mad at you, I’m not going to hurt you, Richie—”

She spotted the shoes sitting side by side on the ground with the little white socks stuffed neatly inside them at the same time as she heard the splashing.

“*Mommy!*”

Far out in the pond, two little arms waved, scrabbling at the air before they dipped below the surface.

Then she felt it, like the terrible oppressiveness before the onset of a storm. She had been right after all. Jeffrey had poisoned the pond, but in a hideous, evil way she’d never dreamed of. He’d been there, waiting to get her for twenty-five years and when he knew he never would, he’d gone to work on Richie, drawing her to the pond, luring her into the water. If Jeffrey couldn’t have Paula, he’d take Richie and, in a way, that was better for him. Jeffrey had always known exactly what would hurt her the most.

All this passed through her mind in less than a second. Then she was tearing into the water, pushing with all her strength toward the little arms that had bobbed to the surface again and the choking voice that cried *Mommy!* with hopeless terror.

The filthy water splashed into her eyes and mouth as she struggled

against it. It seemed as though she were moving with terrible slowness, as though the water were becoming as thick as hardening molasses. Every time she looked up, Richie seemed further away than ever, her voice becoming weaker. Paula strained against the water, feeling it resist her almost like a live thing. *You can't have her, Jeffrey!* her mind screamed. *You can't take her from me, I won't let you!*

The water suddenly churned around her, bubbling madly, sucking at her arms and legs, pulling her down. Panic exploded inside her like an electric shock. She fought to keep herself at the surface, to stay in sight of her daughter. The drag became more powerful, the water lifting when her arms lifted, swirling around her body like liquid ropes. She felt her head forced under and her hands lost the air; her legs kicked uselessly but she kept struggling, all the way to the muddy bottom.

The little girl sat at the water's edge, soaked, chilled, and panting. Several times she swallowed, making a face at the muddy taste in her mouth. The sun had set and there was only a little bit of a red glow left in the sky. She should start back before it was really dark. Mommy had always said it was dangerous to walk on a road after night had fallen, even if you were wearing light-colored clothing.

She stood up and looked out over the pond for a long moment. The surface was smooth again. "You got her," she said quietly. Then, a little louder: "You got her. OK? That means you don't need to get me, right? You said. You did."

She seemed to listen to something, but there was nothing to hear except the nighttime noise of crickets chirping. "You better not try to get me now, OK?" Her face puckered a little. "Well, you better not! You *said!*"

The pond lay impassive, not even a ripple disturbing it, promising nothing.

Richie turned and ran up to the road.

▼

i n t r o d u c t i o n t o
THE BOYS IN THE RAIN

This is a story that came out of some recurrent dream imagery. For me, dreaming is rummaging through a grab-bag of odds and ends and figuring out uses for them. Well, after the fact—as I've pointed out elsewhere, I don't dream lucidly, ever. I never know when I'm dreaming because everything is equally absurd to me. The boys in the rain in particular seemed no more and no less unreasonable than anything else I've ever seen. Sometimes I even forget and wonder if they're still out there every time it rains...

As someone pointed out to me once, life is what happens when you're making other plans. And if you don't make other plans, it happens anyway.

The Boys in the Rain

“They’re out there again,” Delia said.

“Who?” asked Joe, turning a page in the book he was reading.

“Those boys. They’re out in the rain again.” She touched her index finger to the chill window as though to blot the raindrops on the other side. There was a small halo of fog when she took her finger away.

“So they’re out in the rain. Some people don’t have sense enough to come in out of the rain and there’s the proof.”

Delia fidgeted with a button on her baggy sweater. “It’s so sad, though. Seeing them down there in the street like that.”

“So don’t look.”

She grimaced over her shoulder at him. “Joe, what if they don’t have homes to go to?”

Joe shifted position slightly on the couch, bracing his bare feet more firmly against the arm and didn’t look up from his book. “They must go somewhere, since they aren’t there all the time.”

Delia turned back to the window. It was one of three in the little alcove that stuck out from the rest of the building just enough to give her a view of the whole street. Marks on the woodwork showed where a windowseat had once been. When they had taken the apartment, she and Joe had talked about having another windowseat put in over the scars of the old, but that had been a year ago. Now neither of them mentioned it any more. She knew Joe would be against the idea—*Why give the robbers who own this place free added value?* he’d say. *They won’t give us a break on the rent and they’ll jack it way the hell up on the next people to live here after we leave.* The trouble with

knowing someone really well, she thought, was that ninety percent of any discussions were finished before they were started.

"Are you going to stand there and watch those boys all night?" he asked. "I might."

He sighed noisily but didn't say anything else. Delia pulled the sweater more tightly around her. It was a cold spring this year. Cold and wet and melancholy. She found herself passing the days wrapped in a sweater or her afghan (the result of her one burst of artsy-craftsiness in college), eating bottles of sinus headache remedy like mints and wading through a vague, free-floating disappointment. The last of the winter blahs, she told herself. Once the weather warmed up, she'd snap out of it. By contrast, Joe was unaffected by things like weather. He seldom got depressed for any reason and he didn't waste any anxiety on something as far removed from his life as a group of teenaged boys in the rain.

She couldn't remember exactly when she had first noticed them. It had been some time before the last snow, a half-hearted storm that had turned to rain and then fizzled out. They'd been down there at the bus stop that night just as they were now, idly hanging around the sign, standing on the curb, sitting on the back of the bench with their feet on the seat and then jumping off again. They were always shifting about, the way people did when there was nothing to do and nowhere to go.

Delia was uncertain of precisely how many there were. The bench was in the shadow of another building, away from the streetlamps and she could see only their forms when they sat on it. Sometimes they seemed to blend together or divide so that, watching, she would realize she was seeing one when she thought there had been three or two where she'd thought there'd been only one. They melted in and out of the darkness, distinct only when they were near the bus stop sign where the streetlamps cut them into the definite shapes of boys. There couldn't have been more than eight of them, she decided, and no less than four. Six or seven, then, and she had become so familiar with their postures and movements that she was sure they were the same six or seven every night. Every *rainy* night—they didn't show up on clear nights. Peculiar. Why only rainy nights? It should have been the other way around.

"*Delia.*" Now she heard Joe put the book down. "Do you really intend just to stand there all night?"

She shrugged. "There's nothing else to do."

"For God's sake, turn on the TV if you want, read a book or something." He paused, waiting for her to move away from the window. When she didn't, he said, "If you stay there, they're going to think you want to invite them up. I'm sure they've already noticed you watching them."

"From seven stores up, they can't tell who I am."

"Don't be so sure. You could be coming home from work some night and find those little bastards have arranged a reception for you."

One of them stumbled and fell off the curb into the gutter. Delia flinched, holding her breath till he got up again, wiping himself off. He limped around the others, exaggerating the movement comically. Just boys. Just kids playing in the rain. "What can their families be thinking of?" she said aloud.

Joe grunted, got up and put on the radio. "Damn it, will you come away from there? And don't complain there's nothing to do. I offered to take you to a movie earlier."

"It's Saturday night. All the theaters are packed," she said over the longingly high voice of a singer who moaned that he'd been waiting for a girl like her to come into his life.

"Big deal. It's a crowded world and getting more crowded. You ought to be used to it by now."

"Sitting shoulder to shoulder in the dark with a lot of strangers isn't my idea of a good time."

"No, you'd rather watch strangers hang out in the rain. Honest to God, Delia, you're turning into some kind of cranky old lady."

"I am not." She rubbed her arms briskly with irritation and moved away from the window. Joe sat down on the couch again, watching her as she wandered over to the bookshelf.

"You don't want to go out but you're restless, aren't you?"

"I don't know what I am."

"Yeah, you're restless. And cranky and fussy because of it."

Delia made a face, pulled a book out at random and plumped down on the old green easychair.

"And now you're mad at me."

"I'm not mad. At anyone." She opened the book and looked down her nose at it.

"Then talk to me."

She rested her head against the back of the chair. "I don't know what I am," she said again.

"Well, I do. You're moody as hell is what you are." He gave her a wry, lopsided smile before he put his feet up and opened his own book again. Disc jockey patter flowed into the gulf between them, filling it with snappy complaints about the exceptionally rainy spring they were having. Delia stared at the ceiling. Decades of replastering had made it uneven and lumpy, as though it were the topographical map of some alien terrain turned upside-down and hanging over their heads. Joe had assured her it wouldn't fall in; so far, he'd been right. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling herself sink deeper into—the last of the winter blahs? No, it seemed like something else now. She moved her head slightly, so that Joe was in her

peripheral vision. The lamplight gave his brown hair honey-colored overtones.

Delia and Joe at home, home and dry. Dry. Her gaze roamed over the ceiling again, the book in her lap forgotten. The boys in the rain appeared in her mind's eye. The street gleamed wetly, reflecting the light from the streetlamps as cold white blobs, making the boys seem more like moving holes of darkness, darker than the darkness swimming before her unblinking eyes. They stood at the curb in accidental formation with their toes over the gutter, rocking back and forth. Just kids out playing in the rain. How could they stand to be cold and wet for so long? Was their hair plastered to their head, the rain running down their faces and necks? Were they chilled to the point of numbness? In her mental image, the impromptu line suddenly turned and looked up at the window. Now she could almost make out some of their faces, pale as the streetlights, expressionless, anonymous, too hard for children, too unfinished for adults, almost too cold to be human, no adolescent charm, none at all. Washed away in the rain, she thought.

The one farthest away from her vanished. He dissolved into the shadows so completely and quickly that she wasn't sure he had been there at all. And then the whole waking dream itself dissolved into the white of the ceiling. Delia blinked her watering eyes.

"Want to go to bed?"

She looked over at Joe, raising her eyebrows at him. "Huh?"

"You were snoring."

"Was I?" She sighed. Of course he meant go to sleep.

"Like a soldier." He closed the book with a snap. "What do you say?"

"I'm not really sleepy."

Joe laughed briefly. "Right. I forgot. You don't know what you are. Maybe there's something good on the late movie you could sit up and watch, then. I'll even let you eat potato chips in bed if you want."

She gazed at the empty alcove. From where she was sitting, she couldn't see out the window that looked down on the bus stop. If she got up and went to it now, what would the boys be doing?

"Come on." Joe said. He shut off the radio and pulled her out of the chair. She let him take her to the bedroom and then slipped out of his arm at the doorway.

"I want to get a drink of water," she said.

"Turn off the lights in the living room, then. And bring the potato chips back with you." He began peeling off his clothes casually, letting them drop on the floor.

She ran the water in the kitchen and took the potato chips out of the cabinet before she turned off the living room lights. The rain had stopped and the boys were gone.

A crash of thunder awoke her. Rain spattered against the window like sloppy machine gun fire. She sat up in bed, pulling the covers up around herself. In his sleep, Joe tugged at the blankets, rolling over. Delia put a hand on his ribs. His skin was pleasantly warm. Dry. She thought about cuddling up to him and letting his body heat lull her back to sleep. Thunder crashed again, followed by several quick flashes of lightning. She slid out of bed, groping for her bathrobe. Joe began to snore faintly. He could sleep through a thermonuclear war and wake relaxed and refreshed. Ignoring the coldness of the floor, she padded barefoot to the living room.

Instead of going directly to the window, she sat down on the sofa and listened to the storm. Five years ago, she could not have believed herself capable of sitting in the dark in the middle of the night doing nothing at all. She had never been particularly fond of the dark; Joe had often teased her about her insistence on turning on the lights as she went from one room to another at night. But waking in the middle of the night was different. It was waking to native country; to turn on a light now would have been wrong and artificial. Anyway, there was just enough indirect light from the streetlamps for her to see by.

She found Joe's cigarettes in the drawer of one of the endtables and lit one. She'd quit smoking about a year after they had moved in together. Joe didn't really have a habit. He used cigarettes the way some people had an occasional drink after dinner. Very under-control guy, that Joe. She wondered why she couldn't be the same. Some people just seemed born to steer themselves through life while others were swept or pushed or carried along, having things happen to them. She admitted she was in the latter group only at this hour of the morning—whatever hour it was, two, three, maybe even four a.m. To be merely mortal was out of fashion. These were the days of the goal-directed, the success-oriented, the self-actualized, the strictly disciplined, all appetites and weaknesses controlled, or at least dealt with. All acts were now gotten together, cleaned up, bad habits like cigarettes or cocaine kicked and *you* were responsible for your own life, *you* made it happen, *you* were to thank or to blame for yourself. So she could thank or blame herself for sitting in a dark room in the middle of the night, indulging in a habit she had supposedly given up two years before.

She put the cigarette out in the ashtray by the lamp and stood up. The alcove was a patchy limbo of dim light and shadow. And down in the street—had the boys returned, now that it was raining again? Thunder rumbled and the windows rattled in sympathy as lightning flickered. She got up and took three steps toward the alcove and then paused, balancing on the ball of her left foot. Under the sound of a car passing, its tires whispering wetly, came the creak of the mattress springs as Joe turned over. She hurried back to the

bedroom. If he should have wakened and found her at the window, she would never have heard the end of it.

The storm intensified, keeping her from deep sleep. For what might have been hours, she dozed with the image of the rainslick street and the boys appearing and disappearing in her dreams.

Sunlight poured through the window over the kitchen sink, flowed across the table and spilled onto the worn linoleum. It seemed thin and pale and out of place. Delia's eyes watered to look at it.

"I don't think I'm used to waking up to a day that isn't overcast," she said tiredly to Joe.

"Uh-huh," he said, crackling the newspaper.

She paused in the act of lifting her coffee cup. "That's it. 'Uh-huh'? Not even 'yes, dear'?"

He lowered the section of paper he was reading. "That's 'uh-huh' as in you shouldn't be standing at the window watching strangers hang around the streets. Which you would know if you ever looked at anything beside the funnies."

"I read the movie section," she mumbled.

"Listen to this: 'The body of a boy, aged sixteen or seventeen, was discovered near the corner of 32nd Street and Bonner Boulevard this morning by a policeman patrolling the area. Officer Clarence Amalfi found the boy face up on the sidewalk, fully-clothed. No evidence of foul play was observable. The body carried no identification.'"

He paused and looked over at her. "That's barely a block away from here."

"I know," Delia said uncomfortably. "What else does it say?"

"Not much. Speculation that he was a runaway, anyone with information should call the police. Do you see why I don't want you staring out the window at the goes-on down there on the street?"

She smeared her sleep-mussed hair away from her face without answering.

"I'm not kidding. You could see something and someone could see you seeing it and decide to make sure you didn't say anything about it."

"Maybe I should call the police," she said, staring through the doorway at the living room.

"What? *Why*?"

"Because I saw them. The boys in the rain last night."

"So what would you tell them? That you saw some boys hanging out in the rain last night?"

"Well...yes."

"Bad idea, Delia. Just telling them there was a group of boys on the street last night isn't providing them with any information on the dead kid who

may not have been with them in the first place.”

“I have a feeling he was. The paper said he was found about a block away from here—”

“That doesn’t mean shit, Deals. Stay away from that window from now on.”

She got up and stomped over to the coffeepot to refill her cup. “Why don’t you just put a bag over my head? That way I couldn’t see anything. Or better yet, sew my eyes shut or poke them out altogether.”

“I’m trying to help you, to see that you protect yourself.”

“You’re not my father,” she said, pouring a dollop of milk into her coffee. The spoon rang on the porcelain as she stirred it. “You’re not even my husband.”

“Not legally, perhaps, but in every other sense I am.”

She bit her lower lip so she wouldn’t ask him which of the two relationships she had mentioned he was referring to.

“If you’d just stop and think for two seconds, you’d see I’m right.”

“Look, Joe. I’m not going to keep away from the window just because I might see something.”

“I didn’t say that.” Joe rapped the table with his knuckles. “Now you’re twisting what I said because you don’t want to hear it.”

“You know how I feel about anyone telling me what to do.”

“I’m not trying to boss you around. I’m trying to show you that you’ve been doing something foolish.”

She adjusted her bathrobe, pulling the belt tighter. “I really didn’t want to fight with you today.”

Joe spread his hands. “Then don’t.”

“All right. I won’t.” She gulped down half her coffee and dashed the rest in the sink. “I’m going to take a shower.”

The memory of the daydream or waking dream of whatever it had been from the night before tagged after her as she moved languidly through the day. She had visualized one of the boys disappearing from the group. Had he reappeared a block away, face up on the pavement, dead? She had not visualized that. But then, the boy had disappeared on his own in the dream, not because she’d willed it.

She and Joe made a half-hearted peace in which the subject of her window vigils was dropped unresolved. Conversation between them dried up. When Joe suggested a matinee, she agreed to it neutrally as an opportunity for them to get away from each other while being together. They sat side by side in the dark theater, reprieved from their relationship for two hours and when they emerged, blinking, into the fading day, the sun had vanished behind low-hanging, gray clouds.

“It’ll rain like a bastard tonight,” someone walking out behind them

said. "It's just not going to let up."

Joe squeezed her hand as they walked to the car. By dark, it was pouring.

On the couch, Joe snored softly, his ever-present book fallen open face down on his chest. Delia watched him sleep, knowing that when he woke up, he would be annoyed with her for not rousing him. Too bad.

She wasn't actually angry with him any more. He couldn't understand her all the time any more than she could wake him up every time he dozed off before bedtime. They'd been together for almost three years, unmarried because of the tax penalty of the legal state of wedlock, which they'd both agreed was ridiculous and unfair. Almost three years. Had their relationship been a person, it would be well into the toddler stage, still developing, very troublesome. She wondered if a relationship could be reduced to those terms. Sometimes it did feel as though they had some sort of young, unwieldily creature between them that they were struggling to tame or something. Or maybe she was just wondering whether to have a baby, as she did every so often.

Joe twitched in his sleep. The sheer familiarity of him was suddenly huge in her mind, like a balloon that had abruptly inflated in a small, enclosed area. She backed away a step. Thunder rumbled mutedly, gently, it seemed to her, almost as if to remind her that it was still raining. She had been conscientiously staying away from the windows tonight, not so much as an outward sign to Joe that she was heeding his advice but on the pretense of disinterest. Now with Joe asleep on the sofa in all his concentrated familiarity, she went to the alcove and pulled back the filmy curtain.

They were there, as always; loitering, shifting, waiting. The wet street gleamed. She could hear the patter of the rain on the pavement, at first faint and steady, then gradually increasing in volume and tempo, like a monotonous yet urgent drum roll. It seemed to agitate the boys, to stir them up somehow. She still couldn't tell exactly how many there were but she knew there was one less than there had been. She was sure of it.

She caught the movement in the shadows of a boy leaping from the bus stop bench into the midst of the others, who were milling around closer to the curb. In another moment, she thought, they would look up at the window, at her. She pushed herself away, ducking behind the wall. Let them look now. All they would see was an empty, lighted window. Maybe it would remind them they could be somewhere else than out in the cold and damp.

Joe mumbled something in his sleep. She fled to the kitchen and ran the water.

At the last moment, she decided to call in sick to work the next morning. She sat on the edge of the bed with one shoe on and the other in her lap,

watching Joe dress. He disapproved of that sort of thing, calling in sick when you weren't on your deathbed, but he didn't say anything to her about it. He only finished dressing and went into the kitchen for a quick cup of coffee. Perhaps he was willing to allow her the need of a mental health day now and then. She listened to the sounds he made, the gurgle of the coffee as he poured, the tap of the cup when he set it down between gulps. The newspaper rustled as he leafed through it and then pushed it aside. After work, he would give it a thorough reading.

What must it be like to be Joe, she wondered suddenly—to be so busy with the world, her included? His life was utterly directed; he was like a motorboat, cutting deliberately through the water to some firm destination, while she was more like a waterskiier that had latched on behind at the dock, moving in wide arcs behind him as he towed her along.

Jesus, how had she gotten so...*undirected, unmotivated*—just plain *un*?

"What happened to me?" she said aloud. Her voice died in the still air of the empty apartment. Joe had left for work without her even hearing the door shut. She looked down at the shoe in her lap. One moment she'd been listening to every trivial sound he was making, the next she'd faded out completely, as though she'd been the one who'd left instead of Joe.

She tossed the shoe away, kicked off the other one and changed out of her acceptable product-management dress-for-success suit into her oldest jeans and sweatshirt. All right, what did she do next, call in a SWAT team from NOW? *Hello, Women's Movement? This is Delia LeBlanc and somehow I have become unstuck from modern living. I have dropped out from everything we've worked to achieve. I am visibly invisible. Unvisible. I need to have my consciousness raised from the dead.*

No. This was beyond the matter of gender, her consciousness was beyond dead, it was *undead*. To be or *unbe*, that was the question and she *unwas*. She had become a cypher. A zombie. *Urban Zombie!! No Thrills, No Chills, No Nothing!! DON'T Go To See It At A Theater Near You Because It WON'T Be Playing There!! Or Anywhere Else!!!*

[How *un* was she, Rodney?]

[Oh, man, she was so *un* that she watched TV all day without turning the set on. We're talking major *un* here.]

[What's so funny, folks? Are you under the mistaken impression that I'm the only one? Do you really think that people don't slip through the chinks into limbo on a regular basis? Have you never said: *What ever became of So-and-So, you know who I mean, the name escapes me and I only vaguely remember the face...*]

What was the number of the Existential Crisis Line?

"They'd just put me on hold," she said aloud and covered her mouth with her hand. Even that wasn't funny.

She looked at her watch. Five minutes since Joe had left the house. Her life was slipping away an eighth of a teaspoon at a time.

Sun and clouds fought for the day and the sun conceded just after noon. Delia lay on the couch, pinned to the cushions by a combination of inertia and aching sinuses, a carefully-made sandwich of cheese, lettuce, and tomato on seven-grain lying untouched on a plate on the floor. She had unread several current magazines and unstarted a book Joe had finished last week and recommended to her.

She wouldn't even fade out, she thought tiredly. She'd simply become more and more inert until she devolved into a speed-bump on the highway of life. *Joe's* life. She had an *unlife*.

She would call him. Right now. She'd get up and call him and tell him she needed help. He'd come home and together they'd figure out what to do. Professional help, maybe, or something just as simple as signing up for a course in something unusual at the university. Or dinner out and a movie...and then come home and continue to dissolve slowly, like out-of-date Alka Seltzer in standing water.

Whatever became of...?

Delia? Oh, her shelf-life expired, such an unshame.

She closed her eyes and pretended to sleep. Sometime later, she pretended to visualize the view from the window overlooking the bus stop. The boys capered in the wet and the dark, one less than they had been (however many there were), and she knew they were aware she was watching, they'd been aware all along and they'd been holding her, their aimless movements actually an arcane little raindance meant to mesmerize as it wove a pattern that worked only on someone who had receded far enough, so far that...

Joe shook her arm once and then twice, so she pretended to wake up.

"It's the weather," Joe said. "They say it's a cycle of tropical storms affecting the northern latitudes, happens every few years. Everyone's walking around with their eyes glazed and their mouths hanging open. But it ought to break soon. When it does, you'll feel like a new person. Trust me."

She did trust him, Delia thought. Her unlife was completely in his hands, or had been until it had started slipping through his fingers. What would happen when he discovered she was a failed human being? Or, rather, what would unhappen? She got up from the easy chair and went to the window, peering through the dribbles of rain.

"All right," Joe said after a long pause. "Have it your way. Don't do anything, don't be anything. I saw you had that book out. You didn't read it, though, did you?"

"No," she said in a small voice. The boys were showily keeping their backs to her; she could tell by the way their silhouettes bent and dipped against the faint shine of the wet pavement.

"All right," he said again. "There's nothing I can do for you and I've tried. You're not a baby, Deals. No one can pull you out of this until *you* reach out. I've thrown you a rope several times but you've refused to grab onto it."

The boys made a momentary tableau around the bench, like a dance troupe pausing at a rest in the music. Lightning strobed silently; their face were turned upward to the window now and she caught a glimpse of the rain beaded on their colorless cheeks.

"It's not refusal, Joe. It's paralysis."

He didn't answer. It took her a long time to turn around and see that he had, absurdly, fallen asleep, his ever-present book tented over his crotch.

Delia pressed her hands against her mouth. Locked out. She couldn't get back in now if she tried with all her strength. The rain made white noise against the windows, on the street.

No.

She straightened up, throwing off the afghan she'd wrapped around her shoulders. *No*, she would *not* accept that, she would *not* fade meekly away into the state of *un*. She *would* fight her way back in if it meant she had to die in the attempt. But she would die *real*.

Yo, melodrama!

That's right, you wanna make something of it?

She went to the closet by the front door and yanked out the first coat she touched, an old Army surplus jacket of Joe's that they'd been hanging onto for no reason except inertia. Well, the age of inertia was over, she thought as she thrust herself into it. She'd use it and anything else, she'd use everything usable and anything *unusable* would go out in the trash.

She paused in the half-open door and looked back at Joe. His breathing was heavy but soft, not quite a snore. Then she stomped out.

Afire with resolve, she marched down seven flights of stairs rather than waiting for the elevator, strode through the empty lobby and pushed stiff-armed out the security door.

The rain, in ultimate anti-climax, had stopped.

She stood staring at the deserted bus stop, catching her breath. They only came out in the rain; they were gone now.

And just what had she thought she was going to accomplish anyway? Confront them and do what? Order them off her turf and forbid them ever to return to steal her soul? They were just a bunch of boys in the goddamn rain and she was a crazy person with symptoms straight out of the paranoia textbook: *Yes, doctor, boys in the rain have been stealing my soul and not*

only that, aliens have been giving me sinus headaches and the Pentagon has been using an invisible ray that's disrupted my sex life, too.

Which was worse—thinking you were going *un* or *knowing* you were going crazy?

The hair on the back of her neck, she thought, might have been standing up. Yes, it very well might have.

Now, attend, class. We shall take our first steps out of the locked ward by walking to the bus stop right over there and proving to ourselves that it is only a bus stop where nothing ever happens except that perfectly ordinary people wait for a bus, sometimes in the rain, and it is not significant in any way to anyone, least of all us. The only un we are going to experience is that of going uncrazy.

She reached around the corner, hesitated, and forced herself to step off the curb and cross the street, watching the bench and the bus stop sign grow larger as she approached. Behind her, she could almost feel the lighted rectangle of the living room window seven stories up. Trained on her like a gunsight, the dividers between the panes acting as the crosshairs. Except now there was no one to look through it.

She crossed the street forever and reached the other side with her heart laboring in her chest.

The bench was empty, the narrow wooden slats wet and cold. Sit down on it and you'd be soaked through. She touched the back, holding the jacket closed with her other hand. Just a bench, standard city issue for bus stops, nothing out of the ordinary.

But the bench had never been in dispute, had it?

She was in the act of turning around to go back when the rain suddenly started again, falling straight down.

And they were there, all around her as if they'd been there the whole time.

The rain beat on the pavement but it seemed to be caressing her, accommodating her form, sliding through her hair, along her skin and down into her clothes, smoothing as it went until it collected in low center and then rolled on, down her legs.

Their faces were visible and yet no clearer. Anonymous; *un*faces.

But even an *un*face could fade even further away, if there was another ready to displace it. Face up on the pavement with puddles in the eyes, no identification, no outward signs of foul play. And what happened after that? Nothing much. Nothing at all.

They stood with her as the rain did its work. After a while, it simply ran along the new, bony smoothness of her chest, a few drops rolling awkwardly from the freshly-formed Adam's apple, down adolescent stomach and narrow hips into unused, unalive masculinity.

Fingers touching face; always on the brink of bearding but never coming to pass. The jacket fit no better but somehow it hung differently from the shoulders, as though someday it might. But it never would.

And even now, their number still seemed indefinite. Might have been seven, though. Very well might have been.

There is no reason for this. Random activity; elements bumping together achieve a formation and a thing will happen. It draws; it has a force. But there is no reason, no reason for this at all. The spring rains come and after awhile, they go.

Waking to native country.

In formation, a look up at the lighted window.

Him? Not a chance. When Joe awoke, he would be living alone.

The rain fading. Dematerializing.

It's all right; there are others. Not many, and easy to find.

The rain stopped and the boys were gone.

▼

i n t r o d u c t i o n t o
IN THE DARK

Lew Shiner was editing an anthology of stories illustrating the theme There maybe doesn't have to be war. He called his When The Music's Over (as distinguished from the like-minded There Won't Be War, edited by Harry Harrison and Bruce McAllister), though the theme, he told me, had to do with any kind of violence, not just standard war. Fortunate for me—I don't know a thing about being in the Armed Forces or what it's like to serve in combat. But I saw a few of the best minds of my generation (to phrase a coin) scarred at the sight of their mothers' black eyes and broken jaws, and later locked up in juvenile hall on the allpurpose stubborn-child charge when fists and belts were no longer enough to keep them in line. So if there's anything I'm in favor of avoiding, it's violence.

Except, of course, when the cure is worse than the disease.

IN THE DARK

◀ **M**y mother had an IV going in one arm and a tube in her nose, and the stitches in her lip where her teeth had gone through looked like little black spiders. In my family, we're built to take it. If she'd been conscious, my mother probably would have made a Timex joke about it herself. Great sense of humor, my mother. Of course, she wouldn't have found it too funny if she'd known I'd taken the Timex off and flung it as hard as I could into the darkness of Comanche Park. With any luck, she'd be too distracted to think about it after she woke up. I hadn't wanted the Timex and I didn't need it to know that it was after midnight now, so it wasn't my birthday any more.

Actually, I was thinking mostly about Jonas as I sat in the dimly-lit hospital room. I wished he'd change his mind and come in even just for a few minutes. Of course, I couldn't have said what that would have accomplished; Mom was asleep, sedated-asleep, and I wouldn't have been able to rouse her even if I'd wanted to. And it probably wouldn't have been so great for Jonas to see her like this, but considering what-all-else he'd seen tonight and other nights, I couldn't see where it would be especially harmful, either.

I knew what my mother would have said about it. She'd have told me to stop moping around in a hospital room and go see to my little brother—she was taken care of, whereas he was probably down in the solarium watching god-knew-what on TV. Get him out of there, Jan, she'd say, get him to bed and make sure he gets off to school all right, I'll be home by the time school lets out tomorrow afternoon.

Unh-unh, not this time, Mom, I said silently. I'm no expert but a tube up the nose doesn't suggest a simple overnight to recover from a few contu-

sions.

I felt pretty grown-up, knowing a word like *contusions*.

Contusions. Abrasions. Lacerations. Subdural hematoma. I've always had a big vocabulary.

The door whispered open slightly and the nurse who had assisted in the ER poked her head in. She didn't exactly smile at me but it was a friendly type of look. She knew us; she'd been on duty some of the other times. I knew what she wanted and I didn't want to discuss it around my mother's inert body, so I got up and went out into the hall with her.

"Does your mother still have the number for the shelter?" she asked me quietly.

I shrugged.

"I can give it to you, then. You and Jonas could go there now. I'm sure they have space for you at least for tonight."

"Thanks," I said, "but I just don't get a good night's sleep unless I'm in my own bed." My mother used that one whenever the hospital tried to keep her, when she could talk.

She took my chin between her fingers and made me look into her face. It was a very nice face; she was maybe twenty-three. That would put her in the second grade when I was born. I tried to picture it, her as a second-grader and me as a baby.

"Everything is *not* all right now," she said. "If your mother isn't going to think about what she's going to do, then *you* have to. For your sake, and for your brother's."

I pulled away from her. "Jeez, I better go find him. He'll never get up for school tomorrow."

She caught my arm. "You can't go on this way. I know you're a smart girl, Janet—"

"*Jan.* Just Jan."

"—and if no one's going to think about you and your brother, then you have to. I know it's a hell of a burden to put on a fifteen-year-old girl—"

"Sixteen," I said. "Today's my birthday. I mean, yesterday. Yesterday was my birthday."

She gave my arm a squeeze. "All right, sixteen. You *know* you have options. Take them. It'll be hard, but can anything be worse than this?"

I pried her fingers off my upper arm. "I don't know," I said, "but it looks to me like things can be rough no matter where you go or what you do."

"Would it make any difference if I told you that I know what you're going through—that I *really do know*?"

I didn't say anything.

"I'm trying to *help* you," she said, sounding a little desperate now. "What can I say to you that will get through?"

I shrugged again. "Say 'Happy Birthday.'"

Jonas had fallen asleep in front of the TV in the dark solarium. There was a war movie flickering on the screen but no sound. I shook him awake and herded him out of there. The nurse had gone back down to the ER, fortunately, but we had to pass through there to get out, and I had to stop and use the pay phone to call a cab. I always remember to get cab fare out of the stash I'm not supposed to know is in the old flour canister. Things were mostly pretty quiet—people don't routinely come into suburban hospitals in the middle of the night with gunshot wounds or from car accidents—and I was glad, because there's always a wait for a cab.

I'd just hung up the phone when suddenly this kid was brought in, a toddler, really, screaming his lungs out. The sound went right through me—the kid was obviously in agony and I thought my hair must have been standing straight up. I could feel the tension level shoot skyhigh in the ER; suddenly there were half a dozen nurses and a doctor and a really young woman who must have been an intern or a resident or something clustered around this woman with this screaming, thrashing child in her arms. The woman looked pale and scared but still kind of cool, like she was just holding off on a nervous breakdown until she was in a safe place. Right behind her was a guy who had to be her husband; he'd thrown a pair of jeans on over his pajamas. The shirt was half-untucked, and you could see the bottoms of the cuffs poking out from the jeans over his bedroom slippers. He looked dazed, like he was just now waking up.

I couldn't move. I stood there hanging onto the telephone, listening to the kid scream and scream. The doctor took them behind a curtain and the kid kept on screaming like they were killing him and everybody was talking at once, trying to calm the kid down and tell the doctor what was wrong.

Right about the time I thought I was going to lose it and start screaming myself, the doctor's voice cut through the din, sounding super-calm and super-competent, the way you want a doctor's voice to sound. "That's a nasty ear infection, but they're all nasty at this age. I don't see a rupture." His voice changed as he started talking to the kid. "A lot of real hurty stuff, huh, big guy. Yeah. Don't you worry, we're gonna put in some medicine and you're gonna feel all better. Mommy, you hold his arms—like that—okay, big guy, I'll make this as fast as I can—"

The kid's screams began to sound more indignant than anything else. I looked for Jonas. He was standing a little ways away with his back up against the wall and his arms crossed over his chest with his hands stuck in his armpits, like if he let go he'd fall apart. He wasn't looking toward the kid but just staring off at nothing in another direction.

"Come on," I said, "let's wait for the cab outside. It's not cold."

I put my hand on his shoulder to steer him out and he twisted away from me, still holding himself. The little kid stopped screaming as we got to the door and I turned around to look back. The nurse who had come up to see me was standing by the curtain, making notes on a clipboard. I moved us out before she could look up and see us. But the image of her standing there kind of hung in my mind all the way home and I began to get the idea she'd known we were there even though she hadn't looked.

The house was all lit up when we got home but my father was gone, which meant we were locked out. Or we would have been, except Jonas shinnied up the drainpipe and did a high-wire act without a net—without a wire, for that matter—to clamber into his open bedroom window. Every time he did it my heart just went into my mouth, because I could see the drainpipe suddenly ripping away from the house and crashing down, hitting the neighbors' fence and dumping him on his head in their shrubbery. This time, I heard the drainpipe bend a little as he was stretching over to the little ledge outside his window, to work the screen up with the toe of his sneaker. Eventually, he was going to be too big, too heavy for the drainpipe to hold him. Maybe in another few weeks or months, too; he was eleven.

He got the screen up a few inches and then it stuck. Working quietly in the light from the streetlamp, he changed position so he could reach over and pound the bottom of the screen up with his hand. It went up a little more, enough for him to get his legs in so he could sit precariously on the windowsill.

"Slide in," I whispered up at him, looking around. We were a neighborhood watch area and I could picture a patrol car suddenly pulling up at the curb and the cops trying to arrest us for breaking and entering. But then I figured if no one had called the cops earlier, no one was going to call now.

Jonas couldn't seem to get his little butt, skinny as it was, through the window, and he kept sitting there, balancing mostly on his thighs and hanging on with one hand while he pounded the screen with the other. Then he stopped and I couldn't tell what he was doing. A moment later, I heard this sort of ripping, and the sound of metal bending and scraping against something, and I saw he'd torn out the screen and pulled the aluminum frame all out of shape. I didn't rag him for it; I knew just how he felt.

He got in and a moment later the ruined screen came down into the yard. Jonas poked his head out. "That didn't hit you, did it?"

"Nah, just let me in so we can get some sleep, okay?"

I'd have to get an extra set of keys made, I thought, as I locked the front door behind me. No, two sets—one to hide around the outside of the house somewhere in case I lost the extra set somehow. They told us not to do that at the neighborhood watch meeting, because experienced burglars know all

the hiding places. But I decided I could be smarter than a burglar when it came to hiding keys. Dad didn't have to know. Mom, either.

I cleaned up the mess in the kitchen. The turkey really stunk after being left so long and the smell lingered. I'd have had to wash the floor thoroughly with the mop and the Mr. Clean and the whole bit to get rid of it and I just wasn't up to anything more than sopping up the worst of the grease and blood and junk with paper towels.

The living room was a bigger problem; the coffee table looked like we'd started to chop it up for kindling and there was glass all over in the rug, from the table and from my mother's favorite Klee print. The print was over in the corner by the brass floorlamp. The frame was done for but I thought the print might be salvageable. It was a little creased in spots but I could try ironing it, on the back.

There was still the problem of the glass all over. Thank God we didn't have pets or a toddler; thank God neither Jonas nor I brought friends home from school. The vacuum cleaner was broken again, so getting all the shards out of the fiber was going to be one hell of a job. "One motherfucker of a job," I said out loud, but very quietly, as if there might have been someone around to hear me talk like that. I never talked like that, and I wouldn't let Jonas get away with it, though mostly I couldn't see the harm in it if you needed to blow off some.

Anyway, I sure couldn't start combing through the carpet at—I squinted at the clock—one-fifteen in the morning, but Jonas might get up early and wander into the living room before he was completely awake. Then we'd be back in the emergency room maybe having to get stitches in his foot, or even both feet.

I took a roll of toilet paper from the bathroom and roped the living room off with it, sticking the ends of the long piece up on the woodwork of the entryway with masking tape. Then I took a piece of blank stationery from the little desk in the hall by the stairs and wrote DANGER FALLING GLASS AREA and stuck that up on the toilet paper.

I was just about to go upstairs when I saw I'd left the light on in the kitchen. I went back in to shut it off and then I saw it on the counter by the sink, almost completely untouched, except for where a little turkey grease had splattered on it. The chocolate sheet cake my mother and Jonas had made and decorated together. Chocolate cake with strawberry-flavored pink icing. My mother had put on a few red blobs that were supposed to be flowers or something in the corners; the lettering was unmistakably Jonas's hand.

RAD B-DAY TO U.

I put foil over the cake and tossed the unused candles in the junk drawer.

The sound of the front door roused me out of the light doze I'd fallen into

and I rolled over and glanced at the clock. 2:12. Not a personal record, even for a week night. I had no idea where he went when he left, or what he did. Maybe he just drove around. He wasn't drunk, anyway. I could tell by his footsteps. They were sure and even and they cut off suddenly as he got to the living room entryway.

"What the hell is this?" I heard him mutter. I could hear him quite clearly, probably because the house was so quiet. His voice seemed to vibrate up through the floor to me. Then: "Stupid shit. Looks like hell." Silence, and then a rustle as he tore down the paper barrier and crumpled my sign. A few moments later, I heard the tinkle of broken glass and a grunt, and then footsteps going through the kitchen to the back door. Getting rid of the ruins of the coffee table. Right. The cleaning lady was coming tomorrow—excuse me, today. Couldn't let her see *that*. Might give her the idea something bad happened. I wondered if he'd actually clean up the worst of the glass, too, or whether he'd leave it to me to tell her a story. Giselle had heard so many stories.

It sounded like he got rid of most of the glass before he shut himself up in his den at the bottom of the stairs. On the bad nights, he slept on the couch down there. At first, I'd thought it was because he was actually ashamed, at least temporarily, and it was his way of punishing himself or something, but as I got older, I stopped thinking that way.

I waited until I hadn't heard him move around for twenty minutes; then I got up, slipped into my clothes and tiptoed downstairs. He'd left all the lights on, like it hadn't occurred to him to shut them off. I didn't bother, either. I just left by the back door for the park.

Comanche Park was this weird little pocket of wild in the middle of hard-core suburbia. There was a covered picnic-table area and a few barbecue grills, a small playground for the kids, and the storm drain where Jonas and his friends rode skateboards. Back behind the clearing was the woods, a remnant of what the area used to be like before the developers moved in and made things safe for people who kept boats in their driveways.

There were a few trails stomped out, and if you followed the main ones, you came out on the other side facing the Maple Creek development cul-de-sac and the tennis courts. But there were wilder, thicker, darker places where the police never patrolled and the kids never explored. Transients hid out in them, I guess; occasionally, I'd found an empty whisky bottle, or some discarded piece of clothing. It always made me picture some ragged old bum finishing off a bottle and saying to himself, well, what the hell, I guess I'll leave my shirt here.

I didn't go into any of those places at night, but I didn't have to. The sign said the park was closed after ten pm, but there was no gate to close, no chain to put up, nothing to stop me from going in and very little light to hold the

darkness back in the thick of the trees where it stayed during the day.

There were three swings on the rough wooden frame in the playground area, one for infants and two sling-type things. I sat on the one nearest the woods and let myself drift back and forth, watching the darkness creep.

The fight had started early. This was the Birthday Fight. My parents fought any time, but there were certain occasions that called for something special. Birthdays were a must. I'd been up in my room not doing my homework when the shouting had begun. The sound went right through me; I sat there at my desk and it seemed like I could feel Jonas doing the same thing in his room, just frozen wherever he was, listening to it start.

I went downstairs and they were in the living room, yelling things at each other, as if they had to yell to make themselves heard over the aroma of the turkey roasting in the oven. I don't know what they were fighting over exactly, not the surface issue, so to speak. The actual issue was, of course, my birthday. Jonas appeared at the top of the stairs as I opened the front door. I didn't have to beckon to him. He just came down quickly and we went out to the park.

It was only starting to get dark then, but there wasn't anyone else around. Jonas and I sat at a picnic table, not saying anything. I used to take him on long, long walks when he'd been younger and didn't know what was going on. Now we went over to Comanche Park and sat it out. I threw my watch at the woods just before we left. There was no one and nothing else to take it out on.

Everything was quiet when we got back; my mother was in the kitchen, carving the turkey and sniffing, with her eyes all red. My father was sitting at the table with his chin on his fists, staring at the placemat. Jonas and I sat down and there was only the sound of my mother sniffing and the smell of turkey. Then my mother turned around.

My father's right hand had come up and smashed the platter of turkey out of her grasp. She had screamed something at him, or maybe she'd just been startled, and as she'd moved toward the mess of white meat and drumsticks and gravy on the floor, he'd gotten up out of his chair and given her a hard shove between her shoulder blades, so she'd gone face-first into the lower kitchen cabinets. She'd started scrambling to get up and it had been like some kind of real mean slapstick movie clip the way her feet kept slipping on the turkey, pieces of it skidding all over the linoleum in every direction. Jonas and I started to get up, get away from the table and Dad had gone over to Mom and pulled her up by the back of her shirt, jerked her around to face him, and let fly backhanded. Like he was swatting her. That had been when her teeth had gone through her lip. She'd been on her way down to the floor again when his fist had caught her in the stomach. The punch had lifted her off her feet a few inches. He'd stepped back to let her

fall then. She hit my chair going down and tipped it over. Jonas and I were backed up against the refrigerator. Dad stepped back and she pulled herself up, using the chair to get to the table. With one arm across her stomach, she half-stumbled, half-lunged around the other side of the table, going past me and Jonas. Dad watched until she got to the hall and then he walked out after her. She made a gagging noise and I heard the phone fall on the carpet. Jonas ran for the living room and I ran after him to pull him back; I got to the entryway just as Dad brought the Klee down on her back. He flipped it away like a frisbee and as she reached out for him, he grabbed the front of her shirt and shoved her down on the coffee table. He had to pull her up and shove her down again before it broke. Dad turned away unhurriedly and his gaze passed through us without stopping as he walked out of the room and out the front door. He hadn't looked crazy or dangerous or even particularly angry. More like he'd just broken something and was going in search of a dustpan.

I pretended that the darkness asked me what I was going to do and I said I didn't know, which I didn't. From where I was sitting on the swing, I could look back the way I'd come, through the parking lot and across Fall Avenue to our street. Our house was the third from the corner of Fall, easy to pick out now since it was the only one showing any lights.

Tonight's episode must have been pretty audible; I could probably have sat right where I was now and heard the glass breaking. Every other house looked peaceful, unaffected in any way. Which they were, as far as I could tell, something that made me feel funny. Not because I thought anyone should have called the cops and sent them to our rescue—mine and Jonas's, anyway—but because it felt like as long it was happening at our house, everyone else was safe from it happening at theirs. Like we were the designated house for this.

So, the darkness said, who would you wish this on, if you could?

Good question, I told the darkness. I thought about the DiMarias, on our left. The window of my room looked right down into their living room, and I could see their two little kids playing on the rug every night. It looked like a collision between a magazine stand and a toy store in there—the DiMarias were not real concerned with being neat, but then, both of them worked and their kids were in daycare. I guess they figured they had better things to do than housework and not enough left over for maid service. I tried to picture Carl DiMaria losing it in that cluttered house with their kids playing on the rug and Sheila trying to get away from him, and I turned that movie off quick, I can tell you.

The Changs, on the other side, were about as unimaginable, in a different way. They'd only been in the house six months or so; Mr. Chang was some kind of engineer with a communications company and Mrs. Chang didn't work. They were a little older than my parents, with one son in college

somewhere in the east. I hardly knew them but they had nice smiles, and they moved around each other the way you see people moving around fragile vases. The Changs seemed about as likely to shout at each other as the sun was to rise in the west.

Directly across from us were the Shapiros. They were older people and Mrs. Shapiro took care of her grandson two or three days a week for her daughter, who was divorced or something. I saw Mrs. Shapiro in the park a lot with the kid. She was a pretty sturdy woman, strong enough to keep up with her grandson, who was always trying to climb to the top of the wooden blockhouse, but she didn't look like she was really built to take it.

The Foleys, on the corner; they had dogs instead of kids. Across from them, in the smallest house on the block, Lisa What's-Her-Name, the photographer who had a lot of boyfriends.

Maybe her, I thought, idly. She could break up with a boyfriend if there was trouble. Couldn't she?

The darkness said it wasn't that simple.

I ran through everyone else I knew and several I didn't know but had seen at one time or another. No, I told the darkness, there wasn't anybody who could be the fighting house instead of us.

It was just a weird game I played with myself. I guess you could call it *Who Would You Wish Your Life On?* or something like that. Or maybe, *Why Me?*

I got up and wandered around the playground area, just to be moving around. Trying to pick up some momentum I could use to make myself walk home. The way the air had cooled down, I could tell it was later than I'd ever been out. School was going to be impossible, might as well not even bother.

By the time I decided that, I'd wandered over to the covered picnic area where Jonas and I had sat earlier. Since then, someone had stopped for a beer and left the can half-crumpled on one of the long tables. High up, the trees whispered in the night breeze and the darkness flowed up from the woods in deeper, thicker waves. Your eyes play tricks like that on you when you're overtired, I thought, and waited for the dark patches to break up on the grass near the covered area and reassemble in the woods.

But they kept coming, and I started thinking that maybe I was seeing animals, but then they were too big to be any animals that could live in the park, too big even for people. I wanted to turn and run, but the darkness reached the edge of the covered area and stopped, as if it were waiting. I couldn't see a thing; I groped my way along one of the tables and the darkness flowed around the covered area like a curtain, shutting me in.

I sat down, hugging myself against a cold I didn't really feel. I didn't really feel scared, probably because I was so out of it from needing sleep, but I wasn't sleepy, either. I was just there, in the dark, totally in the dark, and

then I heard Jonas say, “Jan?”

“What are you doing out here in the park?” I whispered. Like someone was going to hear us, right?

“I’m not in the park,” he said. “I’m in the dark, same as you. Where we’ve always been.”

I looked around but I still couldn’t see anything. And then, unbidden, the sight of my mother in the hospital bed rose up in my mind. I could see her as clearly as if I were back there with her, the tube in her nose, the IV, the stitches, and, beneath her closed lids, her eyes moving back and forth, back and forth.

I’m dreaming, I thought. I’m dreaming that I got up and went to the park. Not this time, said the darkness.

“Sometimes, you can do things,” Jonas said. He sounded real young and real old all at the same time. His voice would be changing soon, and the drainpipe wouldn’t hold him much longer, I thought. “Sometimes, when everything’s right, you can—um, *do* things.”

“Where are you?”

“I told you, same place you are,” he said tiredly. “Hurry up. This isn’t gonna last forever, you know.”

He’s eleven years old, I told the darkness. He’s just eleven years old, it isn’t fair—

There were no words—there never had been, really—but now I could feel what was being directed at me and how it had been there all along, flicking at the fringes of what I knew as real divided from unreal. That was a smaller issue than I’d thought; after all, what was real in our house wasn’t real in any of the others on our block.

Which made me wonder, then: did someone else, sitting in the dark somewhere, wish this on me?

No, said the darkness, this was always yours. But sometimes, when the conditions are right...when an offering has been made...

I saw myself flinging my watch at the darkest part of the woods, and I could see how it was an action that had been part of this really convoluted arrangement of things that could have happened—like, there was another part of the same thing where I was a lot older and I hit somebody, and sometime else when I wasn’t much older and somebody hit me, and some other things. But I’d thrown the watch, because there wasn’t anyone or anything else to take it all out on. Just a little offering at the right moment.

And I was thinking then that there was something in my dad that had come out of the darkness, but right as soon as I thought it, I knew I was wrong, it was the other way around altogether.

So...what, then?

Fix it, said the darkness.

Picture of myself at school, just before final exams and suddenly all the test answers dropping into my lap out of nowhere. I should be so lucky, I thought, but it was like that. Putting in the fix. So few of us, you know, are smart enough or lucky enough to be able to resist something like that, to not need it. Especially if you know something bad'll happen to you unless you go for it.

"Mom won't do anything," Jonas said hollowly. "*You* won't do anything. *I can't* do anything. What am I gonna do—go to a shelter all by myself and ask if maybe I could be an honorary battered woman? That'd be pretty cool, right?"

"What do you want me to do?" I said. I knew, though, and Jonas knew I did, but he said it anyway.

"Put it on somebody else. Let somebody else be in the line of fire, let somebody else take it. It's us as much as Mom. Someday you'll be where Mom is. And someday—" He cut off, but I heard him. *Someday, I'll be like Dad.* Shitty thing to have to know about yourself.

"That's an awful lot of return to get just for one watch," I said, laughing a little. I'm not sure why I was laughing, nothing was funny. "One little birthday watch."

So, Rad B-day to U.

Here was the deal. Better anyone else than us, right? Or would I really let things go on, let Mom keep a tube in her nose so the DiMaria kids wouldn't have to grow up like we did, so Mrs. Chang wouldn't have to have a tube in *her* nose? So Mrs. Shapiro's daughter wouldn't have to ride in the ambulance with her to the hospital? I could see my father, not with that strange blank look but smiling or looking sad or being like just a regular person, and my mother not telling stories about how she was accident prone, and Jonas and me not waiting for the storm to burst. I could see it all, and I wanted it more than anything. What the hell, if it's going to have to happen anyway, let it happen to someone else.

But the thing was, when it did, we weren't going to call the cops, either. Nobody ever would. Neighborhood watch area—we only call the cops on strangers, suspicious persons lurking about, not the people we live with. And if I thought I was going to do it, I was wrong, because that was part of the deal. I didn't have to do anything, and the person I would be after the deal was made wouldn't want to.

And I heard myself say, just as plain as anything, "I can't live with that, either."

I don't know what happened then, but I opened my eyes and it wasn't dark any more, and my father was coming across the park with a grim look on his face while behind him on Fall, the early morning traffic was just starting to pick up. He jerked me up away from the table and said, "What the

hell is this? What do you think you're doing?"

I looked past him and saw Jonas standing on the corner across the street, like he'd been abandoned.

"Doesn't your mother make things bad enough?" my father asked. "You wanna get raped and murdered in the park, too?"

I twisted away from him and walked away, back through the park and across the street to Jonas, who was glaring at me like I was a traitor. Dad was following after us as I marched Jonas toward the house.

"Take your schoolbooks like you're going to school as usual," I said in a low voice. "But we'll go up to the hospital, and we'll wait in Mom's room, until this nurse I know comes on duty."

"What good'll that do?" Jonas asked bitterly, not looking up.

"She knows how to get us some help."

Jonas glanced briefly back at Dad, who was gaining on us. "Is it gonna be enough help? What if he finds us and kills Mom, kills us all?"

"We're not killed yet. You wanted me to do something, I'm doing it. It's not so late that we have to make deals with—with whatever that is."

"You coulda," he said, and it was an accusation. "You coulda stopped it, it would be over."

"No," I told him. "It can't be over until you say, 'I won't', not 'anyone else but me.'"

"You coulda *fixed me*, though. So I'd never be—" He glanced back at Dad again, who was almost caught up with us now.

"Sorry," I said, grabbing his hand. "You'll have to do that one all on your own. Just like me. Just like everybody."

We broke into a run.

▼

i n t r o d u c t i o n t o

JOHNNY COME HOME

In the early days of glasnost and perestroika, I wondered if this might be the beginning of a period in which Russia and the United States began to change into each other.

This was the mid-1980s, after all, a time in which we were facing the possibility of losing a lot of freedom (any freedom lost is too much) due to the bizarre combination of a government-sanctioned religious right wing and the overzealous forces of Political Correctness.

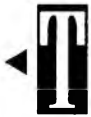
Frankly, if we allow ourselves to be imprisoned, it won't matter much who the warden is or how well-intentioned—jail is jail. And yet the human condition seems to comprise two states: trying to put ourselves in jail, and trying to break ourselves out of jail. Simultaneously, of course—sometimes we try to free ourselves by finding a more agreeable form of bondage.

Is that what freedom really is?

It will become obvious to you before the end of the first page that this was written before the latest Russian Revolution, so think of it as alternative reality. Or maybe that should be artificial alternative reality...

▼

Johnny Come Home



There was nothing for me to do in Moscow but drink. Well, that and look for Johnny, and I no longer really had to do that. The Sense told me he was in the city, eventually our paths would cross and I would reel him in. But until that happened, I had to do something and drinking was it. Bars as Westerners know them were still relatively new in Moscow. Most of them little more than empty storefronts with the bare essentials; if you wanted atmosphere, you brought it with you. Or, if you were an especially wealthy tourist, you could go to one of the headjob parlors, where they gave you a happy-hood and a couple of gloves so you could enjoy your Stoli in whatever virtual environment they were running that night—provided, of course, you'd made your reservation the required six-to-eight months in advance.

I figured it was artificial reality either way and, not being an especially wealthy tourist, I opted for the austerity plan. Besides, in Moscow, it was the booze that carried importance, not the place where you drank it, and Stoli seemed to have a deeper understanding of the drinking organism. It certainly understood *me*—besides being mellow and friendly, it had the salutary effect of enhancing the Sense. The bad news was that sobering up dulled me, but that was easy enough to take care of.

So there I was, boozing and cruising in Moscow. They all envied me back home—my turn to fetch Johnny and I got to go to Russia to do it. First time I'd ever been off the North American continent, too. But here's a little Home Truth for you (and why not Home Truth, seeing as how we've had the Awful Truth, Nothing But the Truth, and Cheap Truth, God help us each and

every one): one place is pretty much like another, and once I understood what I could do in Moscow, I might have been anywhere, the language difference notwithstanding. Even now—or maybe especially now, in the last weeks before the millennium turned. Well, not a full turn—next year would be the real first year of the new millennium, but everyone in the world seemed to be stuck on the idea that 2000 was the Big year. Certain ideas died hard, and others wouldn't die at all. Like Johnny's ideas.

He could live a thousand years himself and never give up on those sweet, mad ideas. Master of my fate, captain of my soul, world full of miracles, tomorrow's another day (or another millennium), anything can happen and it probably will.

Yah. Dream about it, Johnny. He'd be doing that right now, somewhere in Moscow, living in his own brand of artificial reality, dreaming hard enough to kill someone while I held my place at a bar that had once been some kind of counter—kitchen? grocery?—it was hard to tell in this light—in another dingy ex-storefront.

As usual, there were lots of foreigners. Some were tourists and business travellers, but a good many of them were what the government was calling 'temporary long-term.' No doubt plenty of those were skating along on forged papers, hoping to find some way to establish residency later. Russia had been through a lot of changes in the 90s right along with the rest of the world, but people themselves never really change, no matter where they are. Nor do situations. That's some more Home Truth, and you could figure that one out even without the Sense.

So *I* maintained, anyway. The Sense is not one hundred percent infallible but the group back home believed it was a constant, all-over advantage. I was of two minds, you should pardon the expression, about that, myself, and it sometimes caused more friction among us than Johnny's periodic coop flying. 'Loyal opposition' is not an easy concept to put over to organisms like us, but we all understood disloyal opposition. We had Johnny. Or we would when I brought him home again, tired, disillusioned, and hung-over from his freedom bender, to play docile prodigal and rejoin. Until all those sweet, mad ideas built up enough to set him off again.

I was on my third Stoli, watching the bartender sort out orders and make change, when the front door opened wide with a blast of frigid winter air. Over the multi-lingual gabble, someone started calling for papers in six different languages, and the person on my left dropped like a stone.

I looked down. A pretty, heart-shaped face framed by dark blonde hair looked back up at me, eyes wide.

"Pamageeteh menye," she whispered. *Help me.*

I was on the verge of telling her I wasn't Russian. Then I moved so that I was standing directly in front of her, my ankle length coat spread to hide

her. She had been at the end of the bar next to the wall, so perhaps no one had seen her duck. Even if someone had, this wasn't the type of crowd that would alert the immigration officers now moving through the place and shining flashlights on documents held up for inspection.

Chatter became hushed and most movement ceased, except for the sweep of the flashlight beams standing out hard in the smoky air, like light-swords in some old science fiction movie. The bartender moved slowly down the counter, picking up empty glasses, running a rag over the chipped formica, until he came to where I was standing. Folding his arms, he leaned against the wall and looked around in an aimless, bored way before letting his gaze rest pointedly to my left.

I showed him my passport and shrugged. He made a fist, wincing. His thoughts were like a bellow in my skull, a mostly incoherent expression of anger, at me with my coat so obviously spread, at the woman hiding behind it, at the immigration officers, at the world in general for interfering with him. He was very young, one of the post-*glasnost* generation, with no memory of a different time, when this empty storefront would have been equally empty even with a store in it, when he might have begged the blonde's blue jeans from her to sell on the black market and ended up crouching in the dark with her, hiding from KGB, not immigration.

Or perhaps he was a member of a hate-group. I could get no clear indication from him. Even with plenty of warm, Sense enhancing Stoli in me, his tension was an occluder.

The bartender's gaze shifted and I turned to look at the immigration officer now standing on my right. Without moving my elbows from the bar, I showed her my open passport. In the peripheral glow from the flashlight, her face was calm, unworried; she might have been an acquaintance looking at pictures of my family.

She moved the flashlight beam to my face. I stared past it to the two pinpoints of reflected light, all I could see of her eyes now. Everything stopped.

After awhile, she said, "Thank you, Maria Tell," her accent making the words musical. She held her head high as she turned around. I could feel the bartender staring hard at me as the woman made her way to the door, where the other officers were waiting. They filed out in another blast of Moscow winter wind that cleared a little of the smoke and briefly over-rode the ancient space-heaters. I could still Sense her aching feet, her fatigue, her discomfort in the cold, her wish that they could just give this foreigner watering-hole a fast once-over and leave empty-handed, through for the night; and if by chance there were *refuseniks* with forged papers among the crowd, then please don't let her have to find them, let it be one of the others who would have to stay up the rest of the night inputting and contacting

embassy officials and whatnot. All she wanted was to go home and see what had been downloaded from the International Net.

That made me the genie who had granted her wish. No wonder she'd thanked me so politely.

The blonde emerged from under my coat, swiping at her mussed hair and looking dazed, as if she had just awakened with no idea how she'd come to be here. "God, I had no hope that would work, I was just desperate and crazy—" She saw the bartender and her expression became wary. But instead of throwing her out, he leaned on the bar and looked directly into my face.

"Do you have a brother?" he asked in heavily accented English.

And then, of course, I knew exactly what Johnny had been doing all this time in Moscow.

"I'm in it for the same reason as anybody else," said the blonde, puffing along beside me in the cold. "Artistic freedom."

I made a polite noise, or tried to. My lungs felt frozen. The blonde's name was Evie Gray, and she was now my friend for life.

"The Russians *understand*," she went on. "They know what repression really is. They make movies here where people drink and use drugs, they can make fun of religion. They've got *Huckleberry Finn* in the libraries—it's pretty weird in Russian, but they've got it in the original English, too. And God, rock music! All kinds of stuff you can't hear in the States any more, old rap, new rap, heavy-fucking-metal that tells you to kill yourself, for chrissakes. And in the happy-hood parlors, it's anything goes, hard-core, soft-core, violence, whatever you want, and no goddam Council for the Prevention of Mind-Control to come in and pull the plug on you—hell, you can even get abortions on demand here, did you know that? *On demand*. All you have to do is walk into a clinic and you don't even have to give them a reason—"

"Still can't burn the Russian flag on the steps of the Kremlin," I said. "But I guess nobody's perfect, eh?"

She didn't hear me. She ran on and on about the Constitution being fucked like the air and water and land had been fucked and how it was just going to get worse and worse. Whether she was saying all this for my benefit or her own wasn't clear even to her. Not that it mattered any more. Her visa had run out three weeks before and she was now officially *refusenik*, subject to arrest and deportation.

I wondered if she was aware of the original meaning of *refusenik*, but I wasn't curious enough to use the Sense to find out. There were scads of these new *refuseniks* running around Moscow and elsewhere in the Soviet Union. I couldn't decide whether they were yet another premillennial nut-group, the

start of a real movement, or just more people living in their own brand of artificial reality. But then, I predated the Berlin Wall and, at my age, sometimes everybody looked like just another nut. Even when the Sense told me they were all quite sane, if not especially wise.

What Evie Gray was more than anything else was especially wealthy. I didn't point out to her that this was the only way she could have managed this dramatic flight to freedom. It's yet another Home Truth that only the richest and the poorest ever attain freedom, the richest because they can afford it, the poorest because nobody's ever looking for them.

"You don't share a brother-sister resemblance," said the woman with the long, straight hair. "More like mother and son. If you'll pardon my saying so."

I smiled at her; she didn't smile back. Russians were sparing with their smiles. Whoever had taught her English had been from Boston. "He's adopted."

"Excuse me?" She looked puzzled.

"Nothing. Yuri at the Kropotkin hard currency bar gave me this address."

Her gaze slid to Evie Gray. "Did something happen at the Kropotkin?"

"No. Almost, but it was averted," I said.

"Good answer," Evie murmured.

"I understand," said the woman, stepping to the dark velvet curtain behind her. She sounded friendlier but she still didn't smile. "You realize this is a very exclusive *mesto*; foreign visitors who come here must reserve many months in advance and the wait list is already a year long."

The bundle in Evie's outthrust hand was obscenely thick. "I can pay."

The woman made it disappear almost before my new American friend realized she had taken it. "Next time, you should be more discreet. Put it in a little sack and pass it. If others saw, you could be marked as worth robbing."

"I wouldn't let that happen," I said, "but we promise we'll be more careful in the future."

"*Harashow*. This way." She pulled the curtain aside and stepped into the headjob parlor.

I liked the simple descriptiveness of their name for it: *mesto*—literally, *place*. *Some place else* might have been more like it. The Russians had embraced virtual reality with a religious fervor. Having been through only a few days of a Russian winter and hearing it called unseasonably warm, I could understand. But virtual reality was just as major in the States and any other country developed enough to maintain the technology. I could understand that, too. It was merely the next logical step after television and video games, really.

The *mesto* wasn't much like an American arcade. Instead of little single or double booths, there were rows of what looked like old barber chairs, about fifty altogether, all of them occupied by people wearing headpieces and action-gloves. Lots of weird hand-motions going on, some I could guess at and some I wouldn't have wanted to. There were no individual units—all the cables from the equipment disappeared into the floor. Centralized transmission; no variety, but it would make the *mesto*'s operating costs a lot cheaper, increasing the profit margin to something that even an old 80s greed-is-good throwback would call more than respectable.

"How long have you been operating?" I asked the woman as I followed her to the end of the last row of chairs.

"Almost a year," she said.

At the end of the row was a vacant chair, the only one in the room, with a head-piece sitting on it like an abandoned crown. "Your companion bought you an hour's worth," the woman said, gesturing at it. "Take your pleasure."

I blew out an irritated breath. "That's not what I'm here for."

"If you want to see your *brother*, you'll take the hour." She picked up the head-piece and held it out to me.

It didn't make any sense, and I was having a hard time with the Sense as well. The long, cold walk from the Kropotkin had sobered me up and I was dull. But the little flicker that I managed to get from her indicated that somehow, she was telling the truth. Maybe Johnny wanted me all tangled up with wires and distracted with fancy pictures before he'd talk to me, figuring that would keep me from sussing him out. As if this artificial reality could come between us any better than the one he'd made for himself. Dream on, and on, and on, Johnny.

The woman helped me with the gloves and then started to put the head-piece on me. "I'd like some Stoli, please," I said.

"This is not a voluta bar," she said. "We don't serve anything. If you wanted drinks, you should have brought your own."

"Get her some vodka." Evie slipped a hand into her pocket. "You can get me some, too."

The woman hesitated.

"And bring a straw. You know, one of those hollow tube things you can suck liquids through?" I added, in response to her blank look. "Unless you're hiding some dispensers for the headpieces?"

"Yeah, it's the same fuck-the-tourists crap all over," said Evie.

"Shut up," I told her.

"Sometimes there's a bottle back in the office. A straw—" the woman shrugged. "I'll see what I can find." She took something from Evie—discreetly enough, I supposed—and slipped out a nearby door. Evie moved to help me with the head-piece.

"Hold it," I said.

She drew back a little, looking stung.

"I can't go on helping you indefinitely, you know."

"Can't?" She gave me a fast, pained grin. "You mean *won't*, right?"

"Look, I can fix it so tired cops don't see what they don't want to see. But I don't forge residency papers. And I'm not staying in Russia any longer than I have to."

"But you could make someone forge papers for me, couldn't you?"

I wanted to shake her. "Is this place really so much better than the U.S.? You think Russia is heaven just because they've got *Huckleberry Finn* on the shelves and rap music on the radio and abortion on demand? Does the name 'Stalin' mean anything to you? How about 'Pamyat'? They were just another anti-Semitic hate group in the early 90s, but now even their staunchest sympathizers are afraid of them. And they're not the only haters running around loose, all of them with their own agendas, but two things they all agree on: they hate Jews and they hate *refuseniks*. You think all of the missing ones are just blending in with their forged papers? Plenty of them are lying on slabs in a Moscow morgue, gutted like cattle, courtesy of Pamyat."

"Pamyat is a bad word around here. Don't use it." The woman reappeared and thrust a bottle that was a little over half-full at me. "Scares away our business. Sorry, no straw. And I have no idea what you'll do with it when you're inside."

I took a couple of healthy swigs and stuck the bottle between my thighs. She shrugged and looked at Evie.

"I'll wait right here," Evie said.

"Hurry up and take your hour. There's a long line behind you." She pushed the head-piece all the way down so that my face was covered and the eye-screen lit up immediately.

I joined a standard dolphin's-eye sequence. As soon as artificial reality had become feasible for the mass-market, everyone had gone for the dolphin and whale stuff. Out of guilt, maybe: sorry we killed so many of you, so we'll be you, or pretend we are. I would have been bored except the quality was way beyond anything I'd ever seen before. The Russians must have been cranking away on hardware r&d, boosting definition and whatever else. But the head-piece hadn't looked like it was anything so extraordinary.

The perspective cruised past a formation of opalescent, eye shaped bodies that turned right and then left as one, lifting themselves out of my path like a curtain. Near a boulder, a fleshy squid ignored me, its tentacles rippling. Seaweed drifted, sank away into the shadows. Nothing new here, nothing in the least, but the quality—my inner ear kept flashing swimming

messages to my stomach, where the disloyal Stoli had turned on me with a threat. Disloyal opposition. I hung onto the arms of the chair and tried to keep part of my awareness tuned to where I knew my body was, waiting for Johnny's presence to press in on the Sense.

I might have been cruising the ocean for ten minutes, or almost the whole hour; my sense of time had slipped away like one more darting ocean creature. But the novelty was wearing off and I felt bored, impatient, and slightly dizzy.

The perspective made a sudden wide arc to the left and passed through a multi-colored rock formation. Something with nasty-looking jaws peered out of a dark hole but never moved as I passed.

Just beyond the rocks was a giant clam, the ridges of the shell perfectly formed. It began to open as I approached—more standard stuff—displaying the giant pearl in the giant clam was usually the climax and indicated a change to the next sequence. So much for my hour and finding Johnny, I thought, watching the clamshell rise. When I got out of the chair, I was going to chug the rest of the Stoli and use the Sense to make the mesto hostess do cartwheels until she dropped.

<<Sadistic idea. Not like you, Maria.>>

The clamshell was gaping wide and it wasn't a pearl displayed there but a man, curled up in the fetal position. He unfolded slowly and gracefully, the way everything moves underwater, and turned to look at me.

Same old sweet, mad Johnny. His shoulder-length brown hair was floating around his head, his hazel eyes were like stars in his lovely, open face.

<<The Sense couldn't get a good fix on you until you jerked the cop in the voluta bar. I used the Sense on the cops just that same way myself, till I found something better.>> He smiled at me. *<<Come for to carry me home, sweet Maria? Sorry, not this time. This time, I beat you. I beat you all.>>*

<<You always say that, Johnny. What is it now, a woman, or another man again? Even without the Sense you could make them fall in love with you. Lots of people can do that. But you can't make them love you. That's something very different from falling in love, Johnny, and after the last three times, I'd have thought you'd have known that. You'll end up killing this one with your needs, too. Just like the others. The group forgives your sin because we understand. But nobody else will. At the very least, they'll put you in jail and there you'll be, far from us and us far from you, all of us feeling the Lack. That's bad, Johnny. Remember how bad it is to feel the Lack? After your lover isn't falling in love with you any more and you're without us?>>

I was working the Sense on him, of course, and he was pushing back just as hard, maintaining the balance of pressure as only those endowed with the Sense could. It was a balance he couldn't have with someone outside the

group, the give and take of the Sense that we all needed, whether Johnny wanted to admit his own need or not.

<<It's different this time, Maria. I let my lover go right after I found this.>>

<<Found what—artificial reality? You can get that anywhere. Come home and we'll buy you your own booth.>>

<<But they don't have centralized transmission back in the states. A multitude all looking at once, invisible to each other but all visible to me. And I can have them all, not just one at a time but together.>> He spread his arms. *<<I found this lonely technician, got her to scan my likeness into the simulation. The scanning equipment here is so much better than ours, they've been working so much harder on it. And between me and my likeness—>>*

He didn't have to explain. Even without the Sense, I could have felt how it was, I think. Johnny's likeness might as well have been him. It had its own power within the artificial universe, blocking our little exchange from the rest of the clientele. A hundred people looking and none of them saw. I would have said a connection between a living being with the Sense and a likeness was impossible, except obviously none of us had tried it until now.

<<Of course, I have to stay in...keep the head-piece on, and the gloves. They're making a whole suit for me, it's almost finished. What I've done for business here—it was great before but now it's taken a real jump. We're going to expand. More of them for me, more and more, wanting to be in some beautiful, otherworldly place, one that I create. They give me their wanting and needing and I feel no Lack, none at all. I don't have to stay locked into the group any more, Maria. I'm free now. Free.>>

<<Why, Johnny? Why do you have to have them? Why don't you just come home and get the same thing from the ones who really know you and understand you?>>

He looked away from me, dreamily reaching up to run a finger along the belly of a passing shark.

<<Because it is always the same. I want different. I want to wake up in the morning knowing that I might see anybody, be with anybody, go anywhere. This way, I can. I don't want to be chained to the group, the way so many of them are chained to lives they never wanted. This way, anything really is possible. It really is a world full of miracles.>>

<<Dream about it, Johnny.>> I worked the Sense harder on him. *<<It's still only a dream, and when you wake up, you'll still be what you've always been.>>*

The push came so forcefully that I would have sworn he'd found someone else with the Sense and the two of them were ganging up on me. The likeness, I realized; Johnny had invested a great deal in it as the would-

be escape hatch from the prison of his life, and wherever Johnny went, the Sense went with him. I had Stoli, but Johnny had this, and it was bigger.

Still, I strained for him, trying to make him—him and his likeness?—acknowledge the connection between us and fortify its existence.

I almost had him. Perhaps I had had him—his miracle world was more wonderful, but I was more familiar.

And then rough hands tore the head-piece away and I heard the *mesto* hostess say, “Time’s up.”

The cold was what really brought me to, though I was already staggering along Gorky Street. Famous Gorky Street, I remembered; every few years, the Russians would change the name to something else but for some reason, they’d always end up changing it back again. Evie Gray had her shoulder wedged under my armpit and my arm slung across her shoulders. She was chattering away but my head was too bad to make sense (or Sense) of what she was saying and the traitor Stoli in my gut was like a washing machine on the heavy soil setting.

Somehow, little old Evie knew—I say it’s a Home Truth that in times of stress, everybody’s got a tiny spot of the Sense—and got me to an alley where I could throw up in peace. Good-bye Stoli, and good-night, Gracie. Or Evie. I was dulled out.

After awhile, Evie got me moving again. She was still chattering—Christ, this woman never ran out of breath, I guess--and I caught the word *problem*.

“The real problem, Evie, old girl,” I said, talking loudly over her, “the real problem here—and I think the Russians really do understand this—” I swing my free arm out to gesture at an empty storefront and almost sent us both down on the cold pavement “—the real problem is, people think life is a ladder, and it’s really a wheel. That’s a real Home Truth and we ignore it. It’s there for us to see, everything is there for us to see, we’ve got Home Truth coming out of our ears, we know everything there is to know to get us through the day in one piece, and we ignore it like it doesn’t exist. Hell, the *earth* is round, it *turns*, you’d think anyone could take a hint that blatant, but even someone with the Sense, who’s supposed to know a little more than the average pilgrim, can still look Home Truth right in the kisser and say, ‘No, thanks, artificial reality for me, please.’ I don’t know what to do about that, Evie. Even with the Sense, I just don’t know what to do about it.”

I heard her clear her throat. “Why don’t you just shut up?”

She took a real chance dumping me at Intourist. She could have just left me on the street for the authorities to pick up—probably nothing would have happened, I wasn’t *refusenik*, after all—and the fact that she got me indoors

before she disappeared indicated a sweet generosity of spirit within that foolish chatterbox exterior. I liked her retroactively, for all the good that would do her.

I got a plane out the next morning—all I had to do was find an Aeroflot ticket agent with a xenophobic bent and give a little push. The genie of the bottle grants your wish and leaves your country.

The layover in London was supposed to be just a few hours, but Gatwick shut down indefinitely with a bomb scare—bomb scares were coming more frequently as December 31 approached—so I took the train into London, figuring I might as well be comfortable. Besides, I'd never seen London.

Forgot my own Home Truth: one place is pretty much like another. There was nothing for me to do in London either but drink. But London *really* understands the drinking organism the way Moscow was trying to. The pubs were warm and mellow. Guinness was even better on the Sense than Stoli had been, and I almost didn't care when Gatwick stayed shut another day and another, and Heathrow with it.

I didn't call home. They'd all know by now, anyway. I would only be telling them the details, and those could wait.

Those could wait and I could drink, and like anyone in artificial reality, I lost track of the time, which was how I came to be in London on Christmas Eve, looking down a week to the (artificial) dawn of the (artificial) new millennium. Feeling the Lack and filling it with Guinness. Travel was impossible now. There were riots every day, and not just in London. The Messiah was coming, they said; the Messiah was coming.

Then the transmission from Russia began. But I didn't bother trying to tell anyone that it wasn't really the Messiah. Just Johnny.

Happy-hood parlors all over London filled up, left the pubs empty (more for me, I thought, wavering at times between bitters and Guinness). Centralized transmission. No variety, but the quality...oh, the quality. Lost nothing bouncing off a satellite, not with Johnny on the job. Johnny on the spot, all the spots. The (artificial) dawn of the (artificial) new millennium. What everyone wanted all along, I guess.

And as to what Johnny wanted...not to be chained, to be free. He got both, thanks to the Sense, in any reality he chooses.

The Sense is a funny thing, and it can even be a good thing. I worked it pretty hard on him, but as I told Evie Gray, nobody's perfect. We'll get what we wanted, too, me and the rest of the group back in the States, when the transmissions to America begin, when poor, sweet, mad Johnny finally comes home.

▼

i n t r o d u c t i o n t o
NAMING NAMES

This was written for Peter Crowther's Narrow Houses, an anthology of stories dealing with superstitions. Of course, I'm not superstitious, and neither are you, right? If there's no basis for tossing salt over your shoulder into the devil's face, or knocking wood, or not opening an umbrella in the house, none of that does any real harm, either, does it? Makes sense not to open your umbrella in the house anyway, right? Of course it does.

Is a person who sees, ah, patterns where there are none a paranoid? Or simply someone with all the facts? Superstition carried out to its extreme becomes clinical paranoia surprisingly quickly. Yet, if the universe is not only stranger than we imagine, but stranger than we can imagine, does that mean we're too paranoid, or not paranoid enough?

Now find the connection between these musings and this story. If you dare.

(P.S.: A person who makes patterns where there are none is an artist.)

▼

NaMiNG NaMS

It had been years since I'd had the dream. So many years that I thought I'd finally outgrown it, if there is such a thing as outgrowing a recurring dream. It was the only recurring dream I'd ever had, and when I stopped having it, I'd all but forgotten about it. As time goes on, little pieces of life drop away and are left behind, unmourned and unmissed. I always figured that coming across them again meant you were retraveling old territory, either because you'd missed something important the first time through or you'd just gotten jammed up, stuck in a rut. I'd also always figured that it would happen to me, even more than once, but the dream took me by surprise anyway.

In the dream, I'm way out in an enormous area, a kind of ghost-field, and I'm standing partially below the ground. I used to think I was in a hole or a well, or maybe even just shrunk to the size of an apple, but it's none of those things. I'm just lower than the surface, sunk into the ground deeply enough that the long, wild weeds tower over my head. It's almost dark—the clear sky is the deep blue that comes in the last minutes of sunset. There's a golden glow in the west; stars are beginning to appear. I keep looking up, at the sky, at the glow, at the weeds leaning in the pre-night breeze, and in that suspended moment, my mother walks by.

It's more of a very slow stroll, a drift. She isn't here to find me. She isn't looking for anyone or anything, because, I realize, she knows where everything is, or where it ought to be.

And then somebody calls her name. The voice is distant yet very clear, like one of those stars overhead. But the name it calls is not my mother's

name.

Except that somehow it is. I know that it is. Not because my mother turns toward the voice with a genuinely frightened expression that I have never seen on her face in real life—I know this is her name because it fits her, describes her, *is* her. It's the articulation of *her*, mentally, physically, spiritually, any way at all, anything that is about her, in her, of her, what she has seen, what she's known. What she has told, what she will never tell.

My mother takes a step backward—I'm not sure whether it's to run, or to brace herself against some imminent attack, and I know that she isn't sure, either. I know everything about my mother now, I realize. But of course I do—it's all contained in that name, that Name, her Name.

And I think to myself, *I've got to remember this. I've got to remember everything I know about her now, everything I know about her and everything I know about our life together and her life before me and after I went out on my own. I've got to remember the way she thinks...*

That's as far as my thoughts go, however, because then she turns and sees me through the bending weeds. Her black hair flares with the movement, her face is tight, eyes wide, the cords in her neck stand out starkly. I understand two things: first, it's all my fault that this voice, wherever it comes from, whoever it belongs to, called her Name, and second, the voice is about to call another Name, and this one will be mine.

That was where I always woke up, and it was no different this time. For a long time, I lay staring at the distorted oblong of light thrown across the ceiling by the window. The bedroom of my current apartment had an eastern exposure and I always opened the curtains just before I went to sleep, so the sun could wake me in the morning. It wasn't that I was so crazy for getting up with the sun; I just liked lying there watching the morning come on before I had to join the rest of the world. My insistence on easing into a day and easing out of it was probably why I didn't have much in the way of those cultural trophies most people have by the time they're staring thirty in the face, but then, I wasn't working on an ulcer or a heart attack or a drinking problem, either. When you don't eat much, there isn't much that eats you.

Most mothers would have said that was no kind of attitude to have. Maybe mine would have, but probably not out loud, or at least not to my face. All mother-daughter relationships have a certain amount of odd to them, but ours was odder than most. This was probably because it had always been just us. The focus becomes a lot tighter between a parent and child when there's no one else in the house—no distractions. I went from infant to very young roommate to accomplice, and I stayed an accomplice for a long, long time, until we both sensed there was a change coming, some fork in the road that meant she had to go her way and I had to go mine. It was that bloodless.

As I lay there, I tried to remember everything I'd known about her in the

dream. I could still feel what it was like to know but, as always, it had all gone away when I'd woken up, every bit, including that Name I'd heard. The only thing I knew without a doubt was that she was going to call me.

Where was she now, anyway? Seattle, still? The fogginess that dreams always leave behind hadn't cleared out of my head yet, I wasn't ready to connect with anything real. Except for that certainty that my mother was going to call, and very soon.

Heat shimmies ran through the block of light on the ceiling. The details of the day were starting to press on me but I already felt removed from everything, pulled out of my routine to some place where no one else could go.

I picked up the phone on the first ring.

"Did I wake you?" asked my mother.

"No. This is the time I usually wake up."

"Ah." My mother is one of those people who remembers things audibly. "Well, I've been up all night."

"Something wrong?"

"Yes. Or—well, not exactly *wrong*. There's a problem."

"What is it?" I asked. I knew exactly what she was going to say but sometimes you can't skip any steps in a process.

"It's...it's hard to explain on the phone. Easier if you just come here and I can lay the whole thing out for you." "Uh-huh."

"I don't know what you're doing now...what kind of job do you have?"

"I'm a chauffeur." I smiled into the phone at her baffled silence. "A limo driver. I take people out to the airport and pick them up when their planes come in. Nothing I can't walk away from."

"Yes, that's you. Never do anything you can't walk away from."

"It always seemed like a good policy," I said, pushing down the sheet and kicking it off.

"Well, will you come?"

"Mom," I said, "what do *you* think."

I could have saved my job by just saying I had a family emergency—my mother was in the hospital in critical condition and I had to rush to her bedside for a will-she-live-or-die vigil—but I didn't. It wasn't that I was so scrupulously truthful—in fact, I've always lied quite a lot—but that there are times when a lie is...bad. Now, that would sound crazy to all those lovers of truth walking the streets in search of an honest man with their lanterns dangling precariously in front of their self-righteous noses. But the fact is, the truth is a very dangerous thing and most people aren't very careful with it because most of the time, they don't even recognize it. Consequently, they end up lying when they think they're being truthful, and spilling the truth

when they think they're covering up.

Only if you know what the truth is can a lie be useful, a distraction for the sake of personal protection. And anyone who has ever kept quiet to keep from looking foolish has no business feeling disdainful at that.

Truth, or a lie: the right tool for the right job, that's all it is. I knew that whatever my mother had called me about had something to do with truth, and so if I'd lied to my supervisor at the Silver Eagle Limo Service, I'd have queered things somehow, gotten off to a bad start and gone downhill from there. So I just told him that I was going to see my mother in Seattle (I'd remembered right) and I didn't know how long I'd be gone.

Victor went around and around about it and, I had to go along with him, because otherwise he would never have seen. He asked me if she was sick and I said no, not to my knowledge. Was she in the hospital? No, of course not, if she wasn't sick, then she wouldn't be in the hospital. Was this an emergency? Well, my mother seemed to feel it was. Did she have anybody out there she could turn to? No, no one. What about my father? I hedged on that and just said, good question. Which it was, since I didn't know the answer myself. Was my mother in trouble? Yes, some kind but she hadn't told me what. Could I find out? Not without going to see her.

He'd pause there and sit back from his messy desk, tapping his lower front teeth with a pen until he hurt himself. Then he'd sit up straight, tap the pen on the desk, and start all over again. Was my mother sick? Not that I knew of. Was she in the hospital? No. Was this an emergency? For her, yes. Wasn't there anyone else? No. Your father? Good question. Was she in trouble? Yes. What kind? Shrug. Sit back; tap teeth; wince; sit up, tap desk, start over. Like a recurring dream. I wondered idly if Victor had ever had one.

Finally he came out with the cycle-breaker: who did I think was going to do my airport runs if I just took off? I said I didn't know, I hadn't seen the work schedule.

That did it for him, of course, but he had to ask one last question just to make sure—why did I insist on screwing everything up like this, did I really want to make everything hard on everyone else?

No, I told him, I just wanted to go see my mother. So that made him sure he'd had enough and he fired me. I turned in my uniform and a driver named Barney let me deadhead out to the airport, where he was going to pick up half a dozen people named Gershon returning from a family reunion. I sat in the front seat and Barney chattered all the way out, mostly about what a dick Victor was and how smart I'd been to make him fire me because now I could collect unemployment. I hadn't thought of that; it had just been cleaner, more definite. I could face Seattle and my mother completely unencumbered.

Well, maybe not completely—I still had my apartment, but there wasn't much in it that belonged to me, and anything I felt I couldn't do without was in my backpack. I could return to it or not, and it wouldn't make a bit of difference in the long run, like a disposable bookmark.

Barney gave me a raised fist salute as he drove away from the curb at the terminal to go in search of the homeward-bound Gershons. It gave me a good feeling, as if he had passed me a little of his power to use for the trip, so I could conserve my own.

I'd never thought of myself as a superstitious person, but then it's bad luck to say you're superstitious. No; actually, I'd just never thought of it in those terms but I suppose that, seen from the outside, I was devoutly superstitious. From the inside, I thought of it as having experience.

My mother was waiting right there at the gate when I got off the plane in Seattle. She was easy to spot in the crowd, even though at five feet, she had to look up at most people, including me. Her black hair, streaked with a little more silver than last time I'd seen her, flowed down below her shoulders, a few strands catching here and there on her gauzy peasant blouse. She had probably bought the calf-length skirt at one of those semi-ethnic shops, though I couldn't tell which culture she was paying tribute to. The dark socks crumpled around the tops of her hiking shoes made her legs look like sticks.

"You look good, Mom," I said, bending down to hug her.

Her hands batted against my shoulders like nervous, fluttering birds. "I look the same."

"And that's good."

She reached up and brushed back the hair hanging over my right eye. It fell forward again immediately, to her disapproval, but she just tucked one hand into the crook of my elbow and led me through the airport, telling me about the big old house she'd acquired and how the rain made her woolen wall-hangings smell.

The cool, damp air was a relief after the unrelenting dry and hot spell in the Midwest. I'd never been to this area of the country before and I could see why my mother had ended up here. The climate and the mountains suited her, and the city was variegated enough to accommodate all kinds of perspectives.

"As close to an enlightened society as I'm going to come," she said, pulling up in front of a three-storey brick house. The porch had been painted recently. "I suppose stain would look better, but I had a coupon for Glidden's rainy-day grey."

"Really?"

She paused in the act of unlocking the front door. "What do *you* think."

My mother would hoist me on my own petard at any moment, for no other reason than to show that she could.

I smelled the woolen wall-hangings as soon as I walked in. There were two very large ones hanging on either side of the entry hall, straw-colored things with mandala-like patterns woven into them. "Mary had a monster lamb," I said, sniffing. "Was this ever sheepherding country? I can't remember."

"You never knew," said my mother. "It's impossible to remember what you've never known. I don't know, either."

I dropped my backpack at the foot of the stairs and followed her into the kitchen for the tea-making ritual. All visitors, including me, meant a fresh-brewed pot of darjeeling. In many ways, my mother was like an eccentric from central casting, and on purpose, as if following a script was her safety net.

She kept chatting about innocuous things while she heated some designer bottled water and prepared the teapot and cups. It was an antique pot, of course, yellow porcelain with pinkish-purple flowers splayed over it, shaped a bit like Aladdin's lamp. She'd had it for as long as I could remember and I had no idea how it had managed to survive so many moves without even getting chipped.

Still telling me about the other women in her food co-op, she put everything on a bamboo tray and led me into the living room which had only Japanese-style mats around a long, low table. I was starting to feel a little restless and impatient and even though I tried to suppress my feelings, my mother knew.

"Just trying to keep you from getting a case of the psychic bends," she said, pouring carefully. "You know how that can be, going from one world into another."

"Do you live in another world, Mom?"

"Always have. You know that, too."

I picked up the cup. Something strange mixed in with the tea aroma hit my nose. "What's in this?" I said, frowning at the dark liquid.

"Drink it. It'll help you relax."

"You're the one who always said that if I were any more relaxed, I'd be on life support."

"You need to relax your mind. I want it all open and receptive."

I smiled. "Are you going to play with my mind, Mom? Reshape it? Don't you think it's little late for that? I've already made a lot of choices."

She smiled back at me through the steam snaking upwards from her own cup. "Yes, not to choose is to choose, I told you that myself and I don't regret it."

The tea tasted as strange as it smelled; whatever had been added gave

it a musty under-flavoring, like something on the verge of going stale. It made my tongue feel dry.

"You've always trusted me, haven't you," my mother said, watching me drink.

"Why shouldn't I? You're my mother."

She didn't stop smiling but her eyes suddenly became very bright, as if they were welling up. "Yes, that sort of trust is very important, isn't it. Child trusts mother, mother presumably trusts child. But I haven't always trusted you, I'm sorry to say. That wasn't your fault, and it wasn't mine. Sometimes things just happen in ways they aren't supposed to. But you see, children aren't really trustworthy. Not in the adult sense." She finished her cup and poured herself another. I wasn't halfway through my own. There seemed to be so much of it, an ocean of tea in one little cup. I would have tried to finish it anyway, but I couldn't move.

"You haven't had this in a long time, so it doesn't take much for you," my mother said, matter-of-factly. "I've built up quite a tolerance over the years, so I'll have to drink most of the pot. I know you won't mind if I do."

I didn't. I didn't mind anything; I didn't mind having been called halfway across the country so my mother could drug me. This was more the drug than my roll-with-it worldview and I knew it. But I didn't mind about that, either. If anything, it was a relief to know that I had to be drugged to be this compliant.

"The last time you drank this tea, you were eight years old," my mother said. Her words seemed to melt into my brain. "That was the only other time. You don't remember because I told you not to. Now, I'm telling you to remember why I gave it to you."

Obediently, or maybe reflexively, my memory began to reconfigure itself, as if it were a stage set undergoing a scenery change by an intangible crew, pieces being turned around, turned over, regrouped to reveal hidden designs and different uses. Here was an old interest in music I'd forgotten completely, a request for guitar lessons that I'd never gotten around to making; there was an old talent for drawing left to atrophy; over there was a high-school level French book I'd been reading in an empty classroom after school, half-listening to my third-grade teacher explain something called The Gifted-And-Talented Program to my mother, just before we made another of our many moves away.

Here was everything, in vivid technicolor and three dimensions, that I'd once wanted to fill up my life with but then turned away from, all interest gone. It was somebody else's dream now, but I could get a little of the feeling of what it had been like when it had been my own dream.

That dream was replaced by another I was more familiar with. My head drooped forward and my eyes closed. I heard my mother's skirt rustle as she

got up and came around to help me lie down before I fell over. She put one hand on my forehead and reached across the table for her tea with the other. I felt her drinking the last of it and the warmth of her hand on me intensified, making my skin tingle.

"You knew," she said after a while. "You were a very talented, *knowing* little girl, perceptive, intuitive. I thought this would be useful at first, for both of us. There would be so much I wouldn't have to tell you, I thought, so much that I wouldn't have to explain or prove to you or, failing that, hide from you.

"It was your lineage coming out, of course. I congratulated myself on that—having chosen well so that the combination of mother and father would result in a child with our strengths and gifts naturally reinforced. In those days, I believed we secret people should only marry each other, or at least breed only with each other, because I thought only about things like dilution. I didn't really know anything about genetics. I still don't know very much, but I do know that it applies to secret people as well as everyone else. We stacked the deck but there was no guarantee that you'd get the winning hand. You could have come out with almost everything recessive and only a stronger-than-average empathetic streak to show for all my hopes..." She paused. "I'd have loved you just as much..." Her voice trailed off again and I could feel how she wanted to believe that last statement but she really wasn't sure.

I felt bad for her, for her shame over it. I'd always said there were times when the truth was vastly over-rated and this was certainly one of them.

"But it's ridiculous to speculate on what might have been when it's something that can't be," she went on, adjusting her hand on my forehead. "After all, you were everything I had hoped for. You were the perfect tribute to my pride and vanity. I didn't understand that was how I saw you until it was brought home to me that I had been concentrating on your gifts without a thought to protecting either one of us from them."

All feeling of my surroundings had faded away now as well as any sensation of my physical body, with the exception of the warm spot that was my mother's hand. It was the focus of my awareness and of my mother's voice, the only thing that seemed to be keeping me from floating away.

"You flourished, as any hothouse flower will in the absence of adverse forces and natural enemies. There should be no constraints, I thought, and no restraints. Why shouldn't you know everything there was to know about...oh, god, I'm not sure I can tell you now. Except that we live in many worlds all at once and secret people—you, me, your father, certain others—can use the multiplicity of forces in them to our own advantage.

"What we do depends on what our talents tend toward. Some of us use our special knowledge to become healers—but you'll find very, very few either in doctor's offices or in ads in the back of tabloids. There are teachers

who have never been in a classroom, leaders who seem to do nothing all their lives but follow.

"You were just finding your way through the possibilities when you spoke my Name."

I almost heard it in my mind—that Name from the dream, her secret Name. Had it been *my* voice, then? I didn't think so, but I couldn't remember what it had sounded like, whether it was a child's or an adult's, a man's or a woman's.

"You didn't understand what you were doing, of course. Not the magnitude of it. I hadn't even told you anything about Names, that's how powerful you had already become. It was something you had simply divined, a leap in logic that was the equivalent of an eight-year-old understanding nuclear fission by learning about atoms.

"But far, far more dangerous."

There was a familiarity to what she was telling me, but I felt no personal involvement in it. She might have been reminding me about an old movie we had watched together.

"I was lucky you were a child, with all of a child's love and respect and dependence. Especially dependence. You still wanted me to be Mother when you Named me. You didn't want the power over me that Naming me had given you. You didn't even realize what it meant to Name me, though that understanding wouldn't have been long in coming to you.

"But it wasn't you I was really worried about, it was him. The third person in the equation that gave you to me, of course." She paused. "You never asked me about your father, you know. You never even asked me if you had a father, or where he was, not even while you were free to do so. I don't know what I would have told you if you had—maybe just that he and I had gone our separate ways before you were born. But then you'd have wanted to know why he never wanted to see you and I didn't really want to have to explain that he didn't know about you because I hadn't told him.

"He found out, though. He found out the moment you Named me."

A picture of a man's face was forming in my mind. I'd never seen him before but I knew this had to be my father. He was old enough to be my grandfather. His years became him, probably better than his youth had; very encouraging, since I looked a great deal more like him than I did my mother.

"That shouldn't have happened. Because he didn't know about you, there shouldn't have been a link. But it was there. Maybe you were just so powerful that he couldn't help sensing you, sensing what you are. Or maybe he was suspicious after I conveniently took myself out of his life instead of trying to hang onto him. Anyway, before I could prepare something to keep you from Naming me or anyone else indiscriminately—and to prevent you from letting your own Name slip—he called me."

“‘I want to congratulate you on the success of your project,’ he said, all cheery-nasty. ‘Our little monster—’ he actually called you that ‘—our little monster is certainly a prodigy. If you had let me know. I would have been generous with support checks. But if you didn’t want my support in the past, I don’t suppose you want it now.’

“‘You’re right,’ I told him, ‘I want nothing from you, I need nothing from you.’

“‘Nothing *more*, you mean,’ he said. ‘Listen, I’m all for everyone’s right to self-determination, but don’t you think it’s rude beyond the pale to use a person’s own tissue this way without so much as a please or thank-you? I certainly do. I have to tell you that while I was apparently what you had in mind, *you* weren’t *my* choice.’

“‘So what,’ I said.

“‘So we’re a family now, that’s what,’ he said. ‘Whether you like it or not. You can’t have it both ways, you know, I can’t be the father and *not* be the father at the same time. Which means that you and I are connected now, if not exactly bound. But I’ve found in my old age that I suddenly respect that kind of bond much more than I used to. There are certain advantages. I would ask you to marry me, but *you* didn’t ask for what you wanted so I don’t feel obliged to ask now for what I want. And I don’t have to. Our little monster will just give it to me.’

“He meant my Name, of course. And yours. He would eventually have been able to divine your Name because of his link to you. Once he knew your Name, he would have complete power over you and all of your own power as well. Getting you to tell him my Name would be pretty much an anticlimax, but he’d have done it anyway, just to show he could.”

The effects of whatever she had put in the tea were receding...sort of. I was beginning to feel more alert mentally, the memories were becoming more vivid, more real, and more personally involving.

“I thought about killing you,” my mother said.

I remembered that, too, though I hadn’t really understood at the time. I’d just had the idea that my mother was considering something harmful and I hadn’t been so much afraid as curious. Because I’d known that in the end, she wouldn’t hurt me...couldn’t hurt me...

“No, I couldn’t. You wouldn’t let me. That was the last time you exercised the power of my Name over me. And you were right; even if I could have brought myself to kill my own child, it would have been a very foolish thing to do. Even if the fact that it was murder had gone unnoticed—I could have fixed it that way—your father would have known and *that* would have given him a certain amount of power over me. Not quite as much as knowing my Name, but too much. I had brought you into the world without his consent; to send you out of it also without his consent would have

cost me my will. I would never have been able to do anything again without his permission. He couldn't have forced me to do anything—like tell him my Name—but he could have prevented me from doing anything simply by telling me I couldn't. Whether it was using my powers or just washing my face." She paused. "You've seen people who seem to be unable to take care of themselves, haven't you? Many of them are just incompetent for some prosaic reason. But many others are secret people who lost their souls."

She sighed and I realized that she was near exhaustion. "So, instead of killing you, I hid you. Actually, I sent you into hiding within yourself. The only reason I could do it was because you let me. You could have stopped me—after all, you knew my Name—but you were a little girl. You wanted me to take care of you. So I took care of you. I gave you some nice hot tea and told you that nothing mattered any more and you would forget everything. Including my Name."

So I'd grown up healthy, happy, and completely detached, unaware of my power, or my mother's, or my father's. Whatever *power* meant—flying through the air? Leaping tall buildings, picking winning lottery numbers, raising the dead?

"You're a knower. Like your father. What you know about, you have power over. If you want it, it's yours, if you don't want it, it goes away. That doesn't mean you wouldn't have had to pay for anything you wanted—you always have to pay, and, like anything else, sometimes the price-tag isn't worth the goods. I don't know what course you'd have chosen for yourself once you had come into your own and sometimes I wonder if this wasn't the right thing after all. Maybe it wouldn't have been right to let someone so powerful walk loose in the world, even if it had turned out you had wanted nothing more than some personal success and material rewards and an especially long life-span. That stuff's cheap, when you can have all you want.

"Well, that was over twenty years ago and I figured that was the end of it. Even if your father came face to face with you, he'd never recognize you for who or what you were, and I didn't have to worry about your telling anyone my Name or your own.

"You *do* know your own Name, by the way. You learned it before you learned mine, but you never told it to me. I don't want to know. I couldn't make you forget that, but I was able to camouflage it. It'll take you a little while to figure it out, but it'll come to you. And you'll need it, because apparently my hiding you didn't put an end to things the way I thought it would.

"Your father didn't call me again but he had to have known that I'd done something to protect you. I knew that he'd look for us, so I kept us moving. Movement is very strong power when done in the right sequence. That was

one of *my* specialties; I'm a traveler and, by extension, a geographer. I turned every place we went into unfamiliar country, so that he'd always get lost before he could even get near us.

"And then you grew up and left, and I thought that would mean we were permanently safe, because he couldn't possibly go in two directions at once. I kept traveling anyway while you just...kept busy. And I was right, he couldn't go in two directions at once. He just came after me.

"It took him a long, long time, but I'd underestimated his, oh, dedication, I guess you could call it. He honestly felt I had stolen from him, you see, and he was incomplete until he recovered what was rightfully his. That would be you. But you were too well hidden even for the blood-link between you and him, so he concentrated on finding me.

"Travelers who don't want to be found might as well be invisible. As far as he was concerned, I thought I was. But I'd never thought that he would actually go to all the time and trouble of following me. The problem, you see, is that unfamiliar country doesn't stay unfamiliar; sooner or later, you can figure it out if you want to badly enough. And he did.

"It took a chunk of his life—over twenty years and a good number of borrowed years as well, but I guess he figured that being in debt to a timekeeper was worth it. If he could catch up with me and get to you, he'd be able to pay it all back with interest and still end up with more time than he'd had at the start."

She started rubbing my hands and I realized they'd gone numb. My whole body was numb; it was coming back to life, the feeling that was returning to my hands spreading up my arms and out to the rest of me.

"In recreating my travels, he has come to know a great deal about me. And about you. I hid you from your power, but I couldn't hide the fact that you are powerful, and power calls to power. It won't be long before he knows my Name. He's getting closer to it all the time and I can't do anything about it—in the act of trying to stop him, I would only reveal the last of what he needs to know.

"*You* have to do it."

I opened my eyes. The living room was gone; so was my mother. I was lying on my back in the field under the evening sky.

Raising up on my elbow, I looked around. Through the weeds, I could see something that might have been my mother's silhouette. It moved suddenly and melted into the darker night shadows behind it. Safe for now, I thought, and turned away to face the golden glow on the other side of the sky. It was too bright to look at, and I had to close my eyes again.

I woke up in a hotel room in downtown Seattle. Or was it uptown Seattle? I didn't know how they numbered their streets here, but I knew I was

in the city proper, whatever they called it, and my father wasn't far away.

My backpack was lying on the floor next to the bed. A mother will always remember you need clean underwear. Even a mother like mine, who was apparently a travel agent as well as a traveler, I thought, amused, and got up to wash and dress.

The hotel was one of those nondescript places that charge by the week, where people stay when they have no real place to go, all worn carpeting and thrift-shop furniture and stained porcelain in the bathroom. Up to twenty-four hours before, I wouldn't have thought anything about it one way or the other. There was a part of me that still didn't care; old lifestyles die hard. But mostly, I wanted to get out of there as quickly as possible, find my father and do whatever I had to do about him, and then figure out how I was going to spend the rest of my life.

The cool Seattle air was full of mist and I felt as if I were melting my way through it as I walked along the sidewalk. Having set me down somewhere near my father, my mother had left it to me to locate him exactly, as a way of flexing those long-unused muscles, a warm-up for the main event.

It didn't take long. My father was very sure of himself these days. His power radiated uncamouflaged, like a dare: here I am, come and get me, if you can.

And just to make sure there was no mistaking the address, my mother was in the front window of the gallery, looking out on the street with a wary expression so subtle that it couldn't have read to anyone who didn't know her.

Actually, her entire face wouldn't have read to anyone who didn't know her. The rendering was photographically real, but the subject had been painted as standing behind some transparent barrier so thick that it obscured and distorted. One hand was clutching the edge of the barrier hard enough that the knuckles were white but it wouldn't be clear—ha, ha—even after long study, whether she was trying to push the barrier aside, or hold it in place. Unless you knew her.

ArTricks was the name on the door, in silvery script. I pushed inside and my father's presence rushed over me with the carefully climate-controlled air. The entire gallery had been given over to his work, not just for a few weeks or for a month, but indefinitely, though probably no one realized it. My father would camp here for as long as he needed or wanted, and that used-and-abandoned feeling wouldn't kick in for a long time after he left. I understood quite a lot about my father. It was all there in those paintings he'd done of my mother.

They were arranged on the gallery walls in a way that reminded me of the Stations of the Cross in a Catholic church. There was an intended sequence, or rather, two intended sequences. In the order dictated by his

numbering, my mother's face started out extremely obscured and progressed toward being more clearly identifiable. This was for the general population of art appreciators, who would see only paintings and believe one followed another just the way he said they did.

The other sequence was secret, the real order in which the paintings had been done. The real first portrait was the clearest one in the sequence, the one everyone else was supposed to think was the most recent: *Untitled #12*. The obscuring barrier was only slightly less than window-clear—my father's acknowledgment that he had known my mother as she had wanted him to know her. It resembled her in some ways, but she could have stood right next to it and no one would have identified her as the subject.

The next one was on the other side of the airy gallery room, posing as the first one he'd painted. The face was so completely obscured in this one that it wasn't possible to tell where the features were, whether it was a man or a woman, or even a human being.

He had followed that up with the portrait placed in the middle of the sequence, labelled *Untitled, #6*. Had it been closer to *#12*, it might have been possible to see that he'd actually had much more understanding of the face taking shape on the board than he'd had when he'd done *#12*. Or maybe not; my father's skill engaged expectations while it diffused perceptions.

The third painting was *#11*, his affirmation of the face my mother showed the world. Looking closely, I could see that he had painted her image in excruciatingly exact detail before muddying it.

And so on. I found my way from portrait to portrait, moving back and forth among the dozen paintings, minus the one in the window, which was actually the most recent one. Yes, I thought, my father must have been *very* sure of himself, to display it so openly, telling my mother how close he was. In the next portrait, her face would be completely clear and so would her Name, not just to my father but to anyone with the ability to know.

"Do you know Boileau?"

I had been so lost in the study of my mother's face that the man had come up right behind me. He was very young, too thin, and probably too rich for his own good. "Pardon?" I said.

"Do you know Boileau? The artist. I've been watching you from my desk. I've never seen anyone come in here and view the paintings in the real order before."

That my father hadn't kept this completely a secret showed an arrogance that I found perversely pleasing. "Well, I know his other work," I said.

The man's eyes narrowed. "Really? That's amazing, considering there isn't any other work. This is all there is—thirty years of discovering the same woman. When he finishes the last one, he says he'll put down his brush for good."

"He says that, does he?" I looked around; my mother's face seemed to jump out of each picture and then recede again. "I wonder what he'll do to keep busy."

"Boileau is an extraordinary man as well as a gifted artist. I imagine he could do anything he wanted to."

I shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. Sometimes when the grip of obsession loosens, people fall apart. Does he live around here?"

The guy clammed up. It was exactly like that—he put his lips together deliberately and looked away from me with a haughty tilt to his head, making it clear he wasn't going to dignify my question by even recognizing it.

I took a step back, looked him up and down, and spoke his Name.

The effect was immediate; I owned him. He'd been pissing me off but mostly I did it to see what would happen. I hadn't been prepared for the *utterness* of it, either because I was too used to not giving a rat's ass one way or the other about most things, or because the idea of someone with absolutely no power at all really is unfathomable, until you've seen it. I half-expected him to turn into a blob of jelly or something, so unreserved was his surrender. And then I realized he damned well *could* turn into a blob of jelly if I wanted him to. Whatever I wanted was now the law as far as he was concerned, and this was irreversible.

He remained perfectly still while I walked around him, looking him over. He was just a gallery manager, a culture vulture whose life was focussed on finding The Next Big Thing in the artistic community, an insulated world that breathed rarefied air, followed its own traditions, anointed its own high priests, and admitted no outsiders. When this gallery closed, he would find another, and another after that. His function was to sit with art, and talk about it, and contain various facts and terms and acquaintances without knowing anything.

Or it would have been, except I owned him now. I could have told him to be a truck-driver or a ditch-digger and he would have walked out of the gallery and gone off to drive trucks or dig ditches without a backward glance.

"I just want you to take care of yourself," I said after a while. "Go on as you were before, do whatever you were going to do, be whatever you were going to be. But tell me where he lives."

"He's got a house on Vachon Island. You'll need to take the ferry."

"What's the address?"

"I don't know. But I can draw you a map of how to get there."

"Then do that. And then go back to whatever you were doing before I came in here. Think you can manage that?"

"If you say so."

He drew me a map. He had no artistic talent at all, but it was a good enough map for my purposes. And it was all for my purposes. He was so

much mine, he would have spent hours on the details. I watched him filling in landmarks, his aristocratic face tight with concentration. This was how my mother would look if my father managed to divine her Name.

I wasn't sure for a moment whether I was ashamed of what I'd done, or just unhappy that I had to care now.

"What's wrong?" he asked, turning to look at me. Concern flowed off him in waves; I could almost see the air shimmy with it.

"Nothing," I said. "Is the map done?"

He held it up. "Can you find your way from this?"

It looked like he'd put in most of the major roads and a good many of the minor ones as well. "I can show the more heavily-settled areas—"

"That looks good." I took the map from him, folded it up, and stuck it in my shirt pocket. "I want you to go back to your life. Can you do that?"

He shrugged. "I can keep working here, if that's what you mean."

"What about anything else?"

He frowned. "What else is there? Look, do you want me to take you there? I'll just close up and we can go now, if you want."

His Name might as well have been written all over his face—anyone with even a minor bump of knowledge could have Named him in the dark. "I don't want you to go with me. I want you to stay here and go back the way you were."

"Oh? And what are *you* going to do?" he said bitterly. "*Not* know whatever you know?"

"What?" I said.

"You come in here and mess me up, and now you want it to be as if it never happened. Because it's inconvenient for you, I guess." He made a face at my puzzlement. "Oh, come on, didn't you realize I'd know what happened? Well, not exactly *what*, or even *how*—I didn't understand what you said—but I know what it did to me. I know what you are now, too. I always thought there were people like you in the world, but my shrink kept telling me it was just another facet of my neurosis, thinking that there were people walking around who could...*do* things. Boileau's one of them, too, isn't he? All my life I've been trying to get next to people like you. Even if it didn't rub off on me, I thought maybe I could reap some of the benefits, anyway."

Well, that explained how I'd been able to divine his Name so easily. I could also see why my father hadn't gotten to him first, even though he could have quite easily: Naming someone like this was obviously more trouble than it was worth. I'd have to keep that in mind.

"It's not my fault you've been standing around waiting to surrender to somebody," I said after a bit. "So you shouldn't complain now that someone's taken you up on it. But I'm giving you a chance to breathe on your

own. It won't be easy, but you can get the hang of it with practice."

He sneered. "It must be wonderful, to have life be so simple for you. No, it's not your fault I was that way, but it doesn't relieve you of responsibility for your own actions."

"I'm not going to hang around here listening to a gallery manager lecture me on personal responsibility," I said. "Forget what happened. Learn to cope."

He hesitated. "All right. But someone should have told you that even when you buy something you don't want, you still have to pay for it."

I didn't like the sound of that, but I just wanted to get away from him and head my father off before he turned my mother into a lapdog. I made him give me directions to the ferry and left him sitting at his desk, doodling faces on the blank pages of his appointment book.

The ferry was like a great big floating house—there was a lived-in feeling to it. The feeling was all there was, at first. But as the boat plowed steadily through the water, I began to get flashes of the residents themselves. They were well-camouflaged, moving unnoticed among the passengers with ease but also with practiced caution. Some of them had been passengers themselves once, I realized.

Just as an experiment, I bought several packages of chocolate cupcakes from the snack bar on the upper deck and then found an unoccupied bench facing the stern. I unwrapped a package, set it down next to me, and got up to stand at the railing and stare at the slowly-receding mainland.

Only a minute later, I heard the open cellophane crackle, but I knew better than to turn around. "It's not what I would have suggested, but it's the thought that counts."

The voice came from below, not behind. I looked down; two women were standing on the lower deck almost directly underneath where I was, chatting confidentially over flimsy cups of bad coffee. The cellophane crackled some more, to let me know I had it right.

"Well, I've always said an offer is an offer." The woman on the left sipped her coffee. "What do you want to do about it?"

"I don't know," said the woman on the right. "I guess I'll have to hear the terms and conditions attached to it." The wind came up suddenly; they shuddered together and went back inside.

"Think of it as a gift." I spoke softly into the wind, letting it carry my voice back. "Or payment, in exchange for the use of your...residence."

"I knew who it was right away," said another voice. Now a man and a woman were standing on the deck below me, holding their collars closed against the wind. "You know how that is, when you get a call from someone you know *of*, but you haven't actually met in person? I'd been dealing with

the company itself for so long that I felt like I really had met everyone in it, so I had to remind myself that we weren't actually acquainted."

The woman's murmur of agreement carried up to me quite clearly. "I really don't find knowing someone personally to be any kind of definite advantage," she said. "Sometimes, it even works the other way. I've had people try using that to pressure me into doing what they want me to. They try using the personal to influence the business we're doing. So I've taken to keeping everything on a strictly business level, I don't ask about their kids or their spouses or talk about my own life."

"It's okay," I said. "I didn't want anything. The cupcakes are yours, free and clear."

The cellophane rustled aggressively. I turned around just in time to see it be swept away by a sudden crosswind. It danced high in the grey air for a few moments before it blew out of sight.

I found a long bench indoors on the lower deck and set another opened package of cupcakes next to me. This time, I slumped down and closed my eyes. It took a little longer, but the presence was more tangible; the bench creaked and shifted a little. Amid the general noise and the rumble of the engines, the conversation that had been taking place behind me went from an unintelligible murmur to audible.

"I can spot *that* kind a mile away," an older woman was saying. "I've been around long enough that nothing gets by me any more."

I smiled to myself, still keeping my eyes closed.

"But they're like anyone else, you know, they're just people. Some of them are okay and some of them you have to watch out for. *But*, like anyone else, they all want something and don't let anybody ever tell you different. Everybody in this world, no matter how good they are, is out for themselves on some level. You've got to remember that, and never fool yourself into thinking that anybody is ever doing anything one hundred percent for *your* benefit. Nobody's going to do anything for anybody unless there's something in it for them as well."

Ferry-boat philosophy, I thought, amused. Well, they weren't very good cupcakes, after all, so I probably shouldn't have expected much. There was a rustle of cellophane. I opened my eyes to find the empty package had been pushed close to me for disposal.

I tried another bench indoors on the upper deck, away from the windows. This time I slipped my watch in between the cupcakes before pretending to take a nap.

Over at the snackbar, the attendant was having a loud conversation with what must have been a ferry regular. "So I says to myself, 'Now, that's more *like* it. Something real, that isn't just junk.' You know?"

I could sense the regular nodding in agreement. "I mean, it's not like I

really want so *much*,” the attendant went on. “I mean, if I wanted so much, would I be hanging around in a place like this, working my ass off? Hell, no. But you want to know someone’s making an effort, that it means something to them, right?”

The regular said something about a token.

“Yeah, well, *I* believe in stuff like that, a token of affection and esteem, all that stuff. So you know, now I know it matters. Enough, anyway.”

I left the last three packages of cupcakes in various unobtrusive spots and wandered aimlessly around the ferry. Twice I overheard people thanking each other and once, someone saying, *That doesn’t even begin to cover it and what took you so long anyway?*

The clouds were lower and heavier by the time the ferry docked; it was going to get dark early. Standing among the crowd waiting to be let off, I saw a tall woman who looked like a garage mechanic showily checking her watch. She glanced up, caught my eye and turned her wrist slightly so I could see before lowering her arm. The crowd moved forward then and she seemed to move along with everyone else, but she never appeared on the dock.

You’re a knower, my mother had said. The other part of that was knowing whether what I knew was at all useful, and I didn’t know that yet. But I was pretty sure it would come to me eventually.

The line of cars stretched a quarter-mile along the road running past my father’s house. He was giving a party. I had the guy I’d bummed the ride from let me off near the last car and I walked back. A mailbox marked the path that led down the steep embankment to where the house sat on the shore of the inlet. Very secluded and private, except there was no secret about where it was tonight. I could hear the party sounds before I reached the mailbox; it wasn’t rowdy, there were just lots of people.

A little ways down, the path had been made into an outdoor staircase, each packed dirt step bordered with a branch. I hesitated on the first one; below, the party had spread out of the house, all around the yard and down to the shore in spite of the coolness of the already-fading afternoon. Nicely-dressed people, like something out of a high-class magazine ad. My guy hadn’t mentioned this; I guess my father hadn’t considered him worth telling.

Or maybe he’d wanted to surprise me. My father, that is. He was expecting me; the sense of it drifted up to me with the people’s voices, along with the force of his presence, faint at this distance but there nonetheless. When I got a little farther down the steps, he’d sense my presence like a ripple crossing his own. My father, the spider.

I turned away from the stairs and began making my way along the embankment through the brush and dead leaves until I was directly behind

the house. I half-climbed, half-slid down the embankment, trying to be quiet and failing completely. Still, no one bothered to take a look around the back and see what all the crunching and rustling was about. Either they all figured it was the indigenous wildlife or they couldn't really hear it that well.

The rear windows were high up and not terribly large, but the ledges were generous. Jumping, I caught the rough edge of the one farthest from the party noise, and there was enough room for me to rest my forearm on it and pull myself up.

I was looking into my father's studio. The easel holding my mother's portrait stood in the center of the room, facing away from me toward the door. This was it, the big unveiling of the capstone of his career, if you could call thirteen paintings of one blurry woman a career. But being a knower himself, he'd known exactly how to play it as an artistic obsession. He could have been well-known if he had chosen to allow his notoriety to expand beyond the small local but lucrative scenes he'd been cultivating here and there around the country.

But this would do it for him, I realized. Like that other artist, Wyeth, with the Helga paintings.

Helga? If I could have seen the entire series right then, I would have known *her* Name immediately.

The window was locked; I broke one of the panes and managed to unlock it without severing any major blood vessels on the shards left in the frame. Pushing the window up and clambering inside seemed to take forever and left me with sore arm muscles. I was surprised that I could do it at all; moving around vigorously was something else I'd never engaged in much.

The portrait was covered with a white linen cloth. I hesitated, holding one corner, and then slipped my hand underneath. The paint—acrylics? oils? Glidden's rainy-day grey?—felt almost-sticky, as if it were a minute or so away from being completely dry.

"Go ahead. You might as well. I painted it to be looked at." I didn't turn around.

"Besides, family shouldn't have to wait until the ceremonial unveiling."

He came over and put his hands on my shoulders. "Of course, if you *want* to wait, I won't insist," he added.

"When did you finish it?" I asked, pulling my hand away from the painting.

"Who says it's finished?" He tried to turn me around but I refused to move and he let go of me. "I thought I'd show it tonight and get some comments on it before I did anything final to it. If, indeed, I need to, other than take a last look."

Yeah, sure, I thought.

He walked around behind the easel and leaned on the top of the painting,

studying me. I raised my eyes to look at him. My mother had shown him to me but I wasn't prepared for the sight of him as he was now, in person. I could see everything immediately and I reached for the cloth, intending to yank it off. He clapped a hand down over it, holding it in place.

"Sorry—changed my mind. You're a smart girl," he said, almost approvingly. "Excuse me, woman. Though people your age are more children than not to me. It really isn't finished, you know; I couldn't finish it until I'd met my daughter. I must say, I had thought you would look much more like *her*, so this is a pleasant surprise. You don't seem to know, though, whether you came to try and stop me, or just to kill me. Why don't you come out and meet the other guests while you're thinking it over?"

He came around the easel and tucked my hand into the crook of his elbow. It was such a corny thing to do that I couldn't help laughing. This seemed to startle him, but he didn't say anything about it, leading me through the house as if he were already parading in victory. The house itself was surprisingly shabby, the furniture faded, old, and worn. In the dining room, people stood around in clumps, picking at the enormous spread of carefully-arranged party food, hors d'oeuvres and deli-style cold-cuts, salad mixtures in big stoneware bowls, and bottle after bottle of champagne, standing in rows. They still reminded me of magazine-ad people; I half-expected my father to regroup them more artfully. But he just introduced me around and those generic faces gave me generic smiles, expressed tasteful astonishment that Boileau had a daughter, and went back to their generic party discussions.

"Pretty harmless group," I said, as my father led me outside.

"They don't have the faintest idea," my father said, handing me down the front steps. "Let me show you."

He went up to the nearest person, a blond, bearded man in conversation with a tall, black-haired woman, and tapped him on the shoulder. "Henry, Monica, I'd like you to meet my daughter."

Monica beamed while Henry hurriedly transferred a paper plate of potato salad to his other hand so he could shake hands with me. "Well, this is a surprise and a pleasure!" he said heartily.

"She's come to put a stop to me," my father said, giving me a sidelong glance. "Probably by driving a stake through my heart or something."

"Really," said Monica. "And where did she go to school?"

"Wherever her mother chose to take her. Mostly bad public schools with no budgets and demoralized teachers, I imagine."

"Ah. My next-door neighbor's kids all went there," said Henry. "They seemed to enjoy it. Do you paint, also?" he asked me.

"Oh, my daughter hasn't done much of anything for the last twenty-some years, thanks to her mother. But now that she has come into her own, I guess she'll do whatever she wants—enslave a few people, maybe win a

lottery or two—under different names, of course—and possibly kill her mean old father this evening.”

“Well, that’s what I understand from many people such as yourself,” Henry said congenially. “The children all tend to go off in other directions, and I guess that’s understandable, if you’ll pardon my saying so.”

“No offense taken,” I said, and turned to my father. “They really don’t get it.”

“None of them do,” my father said. “You could walk around here like the invisible woman, completely unnoticed, unless I called their attention to you.”

I looked around suspiciously.

“Haven’t touched them,” he said. “If you want to know the truth, I’m not so sure that most of them even *have* Names. They’re more like a herd of sheep, they’ve been told what to do and what to expect since they were born. Since *before* they were born. They are their clothes, their cars, their jobs; their things own them, not me. I could have them if I wanted, I suppose, but that can be more trouble than it’s worth. Right?”

Of course he had sensed what I’d done at the gallery—all of his paintings were there, and they were as much of him as they were of my mother. He hadn’t thought I’d know that, which was why he’d changed his mind about letting me see his nearly-finished masterpiece. I wondered how he planned to finish it and show it now.

He didn’t seem concerned. We drifted through the crowd in the yard, meeting more of them. He continued to play his little conversation game, though to what purpose I didn’t know. Maybe just because they were so willing and he was so able.

Eventually, I noticed that the day had stopped darkening.

The slight wind that had been rustling the surrounding trees had also ceased and the party gabble had acquired a strangely muffled sound, as if it were coming from under a bell jar. People who had been wandering about the yard and going in and out of the house were now rooted to wherever they stood—without noticing, of course.

“Timing,” my father said, cheerfully. “What you need in this business is a good sense of timing and for that you have to understand time itself.”

“I thought you were a knower, not a timekeeper,” I said, taking a bacon-wrapped morsel off a plate held by a woman in black satin pajamas.

“Knowers are multi-talented that way,” he said. “Don’t eat that. Nothing’s edible when it’s stuck between moments, it’ll be like chewing a lump of styrofoam.”

I put the hors d’oeuvre back on the plate. “What about them? Are they still functioning?”

He nodded, looking at the quiet water. “They’re right with me, as much

as they can be, which is enough for my purpose.” He turned his smile to me. “It’s finished, now, in case you didn’t know. I’ve been finishing it while I’ve been walking around here with you. Now I know what I should see, what we should all see. Time to bring it out.”

“I’ve brought it out for you.”

My mother was standing in the middle of the yard next to the easel, one hand resting gracefully along the top like a game-show hostess’s. Once the initial shock had passed, I knew I shouldn’t have been surprised. Diverting him with me was the only way she could possibly have gotten close to him.

“I’m sure you meant to invite me,” she went on, smiling at the people standing around. “A great artist would never unveil a masterpiece without inviting the subject to be present.”

He took a step toward her and she grabbed a corner of the linen covering.

“Come on, *Boileau*,” she said. “*You’ve* had all the fun up to now. Let *me* have the privilege of unveiling it.”

“No—”

The motion of her yanking the linen away lasted forever. The cloth flew up and out, its folds twisting and turning like a flower opening up before it sailed away.

It was now a picture of the two of them. There was still only one subject but what my father had put into it of himself was now equally as obvious as my mother’s face and, consequently, her Name. You couldn’t see it without seeing both of them. Of course. My mother hadn’t been able to undo any of the last thirty years, so she had just done a little more.

Someone began to applaud. It spread through the gathering; they were all putting their plates and glasses down on the ground beside them and clapping their hands enthusiastically. Someone even whistled.

My mother went to my father and pulled him over to the easel. She bowed, turned and gestured to him, and then began to clap her own hands, slowly and deliberately, almost in his face. “Sometimes a stalemate is the best victory you can hope for,” I heard her tell him over the ovation still going on around them. “Maybe that’s the only victory that really means anything for people like us.” She looked at me; her smile was grim. “You remember that. You remember that you can’t really Name Names without Naming yourself.”

It was true, I saw, as she moved around behind the easel and continued applauding my father. You had to look really closely to see that it was not just a picture of the two of them but a family portrait of the three of us, but since most people didn’t know about me, they’d never quite see it in the right way. And my mother would go on making sure they didn’t, as long as nobody ever spoke her Name. Especially me.

I turned and ran up the dirt stairs to the road. There was a car idling by

the mailbox.

"Need a lift?" said the guy from the gallery. It wasn't really a question.

"Who's minding the store?" I asked him.

He laughed. "You are. As if you didn't know."

They were out in force on the ferryboat this time, not bothering to hide themselves. I couldn't get away from all the conversations taking place around me, even in the bathroom. It wasn't chocolate cupcakes that they wanted.

I considered it. My new friend—his name, I learned belatedly, was Gus, short for Augustus, and what *had* his parents been thinking of?—wouldn't be happy here, but he wasn't going to be happy anywhere any more. That wasn't his purpose in life.

"Just think it over," one woman was telling another on a nearby bench. "Of course, you can't take *too* long but that's the nature of the business we're all in."

I made Gus stay there while I went up to the upper deck. A group of kids, teen-agers, were comparing notes about some party they'd all been to.

"...give *anything* for a system like that...all that power..."

"...more than I make in two months, maybe three..."

"...everybody'd always be hitting on you to come over and use it, though..."

"...and the whole world wants to be your best friend. I dunno if I want best friends like that..."

"...got to use it while you were there...think it over..."

Big help. I went back down to the lower deck. Gus was gone. I thought one of them had gotten impatient and decided to force the issue, but then I found him standing outside near the stern.

"Is that how it is?" he said. "When we dock, you just walk off and I don't? That's a pretty big offering. What do you get in return, a whole ferryboat and all the bad snacks you can stuff in your face?"

"Are you wearing a watch?" I asked.

"Yes. A Rolex."

"Give it to me." I wrapped a ten-dollar bill around the wristband and left it on a bench.

"My parents gave me that," he said accusingly.

"You can get another. I'll buy you another."

"You'll have to. I need things like that. It's what I am, you know." He smiled. "Yeah, I guess you *do* know."

I did. His Name stood for material things and status symbols, the acquisition of shiny stones and metals and pretty pictures. They owned him, the condition of my ownership, for as long as it was in force. He was going

to be an expensive pet; I'd have to win a lottery or two.

I could feel him settling into his new life. That was the real price, I thought. Once you had power, you ended up having to depend on it. Eventually, like anything else, it owned you.

Eventually? No, from the beginning; we just don't bother admitting it at first.

We were close to the mainland now and would be docking in a few minutes. Gus linked arms with me and dragged me into the middle of the crowd gathering impatiently at the exit. "I don't like to wait in line, either," he said. "I like to go first." He put his arms around my shoulders and gave me a hard squeeze. "You know, I'm going to like this a lot better than I thought I would."

I smiled up at him. "Behave yourself."

"Or what—you'll bring me back here and leave me?" He laughed.

"No," I said. "I'll tell you my Name."

It was a month before he dared to speak again. I bought him the Rolex anyway.

▼

i n t r o d u c t i o n t o
A DEAL WITH GOD

When I finished "Naming Names," I knew that I'd be seeing these people again, and when Richard Gilliam asked me if I'd be interested in contributing to Grails, which he was editing with Ed Kramer and Martin H. Greenburg, I knew where. The Holy Grail is another atypical subject for me and one that I had to learn about. If you finish knowing more than you started out with, you've definitely come out ahead.

On the other hand, when you cut a deal with God, maybe the best you can hope for is coming out even.

▼

A DeAL WiTh GoD

My new acquisition and I took the slow way home from Seattle. I think it was slow. It might as well have been home.

In fact, I had no idea how fast I could move with my new prize. Just because I had come by it carelessly was no reason to treat it carelessly, after all. It was breakable, as are most things you get from art galleries, the kind of things that don't always travel well.

But as soon as I'd rented the car, I knew I'd done right. It was large, similar to the sedans and town cars I'd driven back and forth to the airport in my old job. I set my prize next to me on the luxurious bench seat, pointed the nose of the car more or less toward the southeast and pressed the accelerator until I reached a comfortable cruising speed. After that, a car will practically drive itself, if it and the driver are any good.

My last job had been like any other time-filling bill-payer but I'd liked it better than most; while I was driving, I could think all I wanted. Now, with the miles rolling away under the wheels, I went through my mental trunks and cases and crates, reconsidering everything. Most people would have called it a mid-life crisis, but in terms of living actually accomplished, I was really much closer to the beginning than the middle, thirty or not.

I suppose I could have felt some kind of anger or bitterness toward my parents but first, I'd have had to figure out who to be madder at, my mother or my father. Then being mad itself would have taken energy and attention that I could put to better use elsewhere, especially with this new acquisition to look after.

My new acquisition, yes; I contemplated it with mixed feelings. Some

things are beautiful because that's their nature and purpose—they're supposed to be beautiful and when you look at them you're meant to be glad that there are beautiful things in the world. Then there are other things that are beautiful because of what they mean—you look at them to remind yourself that there's still innocence or generosity or some other goodness in the world; it's a long list, take your pick. (*It might not be true, but that's something altogether different.*)

My new acquisition was, as I've said, strictly ornamental, art for art's sake, beauty for beauty's sake. Any deeper meanings were up to me. I could think them up but on the whole, I tend to think it's generally best not to overburden anything breakable.

Sometimes I joked with myself that I'd have to be much more careful from now on about going into art galleries and similar places. Then I'd wonder if I were really done paying for this ornament to my own vanity, and if that was really all it could be: a trophy. And a voice in my mind that sounded not quite like my mother and not quite like me would say, *If you wanted medicine, you should have gone to a pharmacy.*

But was medicine what I was looking for? Sometimes things don't become apparent right away; it might even be years before you understand why you made some choice and why it was right, or wrong, or of no significance whatsoever. Most people find that last so horrible a prospect that they go around imbuing anything and everything with meaning. Even incorrect meaning is better than admitting your life makes no real difference. For some people, anyway.

Being mindful of that very human tendency made me think twice about having any grand notions about my new ornament. In spite of all that I know and all I can do, I'm very human, no more and no less, and my mistakes would all come out of those very no-more-and-no-less human motivations.

Needing more time to think, I slowed the pace even more by taking a more circuitous route toward home...“home” being defined as my most recent address. Might as well have been home, yes; a place that, unlike Seattle, could provide some past and a little context for my new acquisition, who seemed completely amenable. But of course whatever I wanted to do was fine; all things considered, he could now live completely in the present and for the moment, not for what had happened six months ago or what might happen next year. The self-imposed vow of temporary silence didn't hurt his tractability.

I still marveled at how easily I had divined his Name in Seattle. At the same time, two things were going around and around in my mind like two animals chasing each others' tails: *Anything cheap is worth what you pay for it* and *Cheap is dear in the long run.*

At least he didn't look cheap—quite the opposite. But then, think of an

art gallery and who you'd expect to find in charge: Michelangelo's *David* with a good haircut and designer clothes, perhaps. I wouldn't have gone that far in describing my prize, but he was pretty enough to be anybody's ornament. After all, that had been the role he'd chosen for himself long before I had come along to Name him and claim him. It occurred to me belatedly as we rolled down Route 84 with a fine grey mist blowing over everything like rags in a wind that the whole thrust of his life had been to await my moment of impulsiveness. From here on, it was my show and I'd learn much of what I needed to know by taking care of him.

You give a child a pet for a similar kind of learning on a smaller scale. I was smiling about that when everything went wrong.

There was a period of time I experienced as a series of jump-cut freeze-frames, except it wasn't just visual. I could hear strange, distorted voices calling to each other while cold mist drifted over my face and wet my lips, but I could see nothing. Then I *could* see: someone's feet running toward me while the moisture on the pavement splashed up and out, but I could feel nothing. And then there was something hanging above me that, after a long time or no time at all, resolved itself into my new acquisition's face, concerned and helpless: I could feel broken bones waiting for shock to wear off, and a hard pressure against the side of my head, but I could hear nothing.

Vision went away again; there was a sensation of rising up, or starting to, and then nothing at all.

When awareness came back, I was in the healing place.

Apparently, I wasn't bad enough for departure, it was all fixable. I wondered if my mother and father would know, whether my damage could raise a blip within the stand-off that was their life together, or whether holding each other at bay kept them too engaged to know about anything else.

Not that it would have mattered. You go to the healing place the same way you come into the world or go out of it, and you stay as long as you have to and hope that the healing time doesn't get too out of joint with your outside living time. It seemed like a century before I could do even that—i.e., hope. There was so much wreckage.

Eventually, I began to feel more gathered, more focused. The light in the healing place became less scattered as I progressed toward a more coherent state of existence; random sensation resolved itself into sequences of real things. I became reacquainted with the feelings that indicated the presence of my ornament, his physical proximity as well as his bewilderment and dependence.

I could perceive other presences as well, some of them standing out more sharply from the texture of the background than others. They exerted

a subtle pull, as all living things will. Life calls to life, and power to power, as my mother had told me. Warned me.

At first, I thought it was just a particularly strong life calling to my own, and then I thought it might be my mother, suddenly made aware and coming to see if she could help. But as my senses recovered their sharpness, I realized that the power wasn't there with me in the healing place, or even in the immediate vicinity. It was somewhere back in the world that I had temporarily stepped out of.

Some impressive force, I thought, to have an effect on me in the healing place without actually being there with me. If it was that powerful, it had to leave a trail.

I found it easily enough, but before I could pinpoint the source, I woke up in the hospital.

The ornament was asleep in one of those cheap frame-and-cushion chairs next to the bed, a well-worn flannel blanket thrown over him. His head was resting on his left shoulder at an angle that was comfortable only when you were unconscious. He was going to wake up stiff, I thought; the least I could do was rouse him so he could shift position. I started to call out to him when the door to the room swung open.

At first, I thought it was a nurse's flashlight shining directly into my eyes, blinding me. But even as it moved from the doorway to the foot of my bed, it didn't get any less blinding. And then there was the silence—not just the quiet of late night in a hospital but a complete absence of any sound, no rustle of clothing, no soft pad-and-squeak of rubber soles on antiseptic floor, not even the distant hum of fluorescents burning all night.

I got out of bed. My acquisition went on sleeping without so much as a twitch. I let him be; I was much more concerned with the light. This was not a flashlight's canned beam; it was more like something alive. Shielding my eyes as well as I could, I padded after it barefoot in one of those too ventilated hospital gowns. Whoever was carrying it didn't have a steady hand—the light moved with a kind of bobbing motion, like something floating on a wave in a calm ocean.

Suddenly, I could see again; the light had moved behind the curtain drawn around the other bed in the room. Now, there was something I hadn't thought of—that there would be someone else in the room—although it made sense. Strangers brought in off the highway didn't usually get private hospital rooms with round-the-clock nursing attention, especially if they weren't carrying anything to prove they were insured. I was probably fortunate not to find myself stacked like cordwood in some crowded basement charity ward.

In any case, my first impulse was not to violate my roommate's privacy

but the light was so strong that the translucent curtain became all but diaphanous. I had no trouble seeing the old woman sitting up in the bed or the dish she was reaching for. Maybe it was more of a platter, since it looked much larger than a dinner plate and the edge curved up a little more sharply. It was easy to see that, too, because there was nobody holding it—it was just floating there over the side of the woman's bed and she was reaching for it with the casualness of someone who did this every night.

I held my breath, hoping I could tiptoe back to bed without her hearing me. Talk about secret people and their secrets, I thought, feeling slightly giddy. When my mother had explained about secret people and strange worlds, had she been thinking about something like this? Or was this something else I was privy to as a knower?

The old woman removed something round and white, about the size of an old-fashioned silver dollar and held it carefully between the thumbs and forefingers of both hands. The silence was still utterly complete, but I could see her lips moving. Ritual. Praying?

She put the thing in her mouth and it clicked for me then. The communion rite. I had never participated in any form of it, but I got the gist. Except this particular version was not really an act of faith; this woman *knew* what she was getting out of it. And what she wasn't getting.

I wanted to know, too, but apparently this wasn't one of those things I could just know, and I couldn't exactly barge in on her and ask her what she was up to.

They were around me and past me before I even knew they were in the room, two nurses and a doctor moving quickly but unhurriedly. Not that I could have hidden or anything, but to my surprise, they ignored me as if I weren't even there. One of the nurses pulled the curtain partially aside while the doctor stepped around the floating dish/platter to carry something to the tray table. The other nurse went to the opposite side of the bed and unrolled thick strips of some kind of cloth, laying them out next to the woman on top of the covers.

The curtain in front of me had not been moved, so I was still watching everything through it and wondering how they could all see what they were doing. The way they moved had the feeling of routine—maybe they'd done this so often, they didn't actually need to see any more to do it? The nurse who had pulled the curtain moved to the foot of the bed, blocking my view; at the same time, the light began to damp down from blinding to merely bright. What the hell, I thought; if I were going to be this nosy, I might as well take it the whole way. I stepped around the curtain just in time to see the doctor unroll the towel she had placed on the tray table and remove the lance.

Still no one paid attention to me, not even the old woman who looked right through me with an expression of serenity as profound as the silence

still in force. I was mildly shocked to see that she had a tracheotomy tube coming out of her neck, like someone in a coma, a detail that hadn't been visible through the curtain. The nurse on her left was turning back the sleeves of her hospital gown to expose her forearms. I figured I knew what was coming next, but what I really wanted to know was why. And why no one cared that I was standing there watching.

The doctor held up the lance. It was actually more like a broken-off spear and nothing at all like a surgical instrument. The doctor's elegant hands seemed to emphasize its brutal quality, even though she was treating it as if it were something fragile. Or sacred. The nurse on the other side of the bed bowed his head with unmistakable reverence, averting his eyes as he lifted the old woman's forearm for the doctor.

The tip of the lance or spear pressed against the flesh just under the wrist for a long moment before it finally plunged all the way through and out the other side.

I had expected the blood to spurt. Instead, it flowed out gently into the dish/platter, which had obligingly come down into position to catch it. The doctor had averted her eyes now, too, along with the nurse at the foot of the bed, while the old woman stared into space, not watching but not deliberately looking away, either. Her expression suggested a state of transport or rapture. Only I was watching now, and if they weren't going to try to stop me or force me out of the room, I was going to continue.

The woman's blood kept flowing into the dish, enough that it should have spilled over onto the sheets, except that it didn't. An unmeasured time later, as if in response to some hidden cue, the doctor pulled the lance out. The blood stopped immediately.

The old woman seemed to rouse from a waking dream and offered the arm to the nurse, who wrapped a strip of cloth around it, in spite of the fact that there were no marks, no scars, not even a scratch to show where the lance had pierced her.

They went through the whole thing again with the old woman's other arm, lasting a little longer, I thought; or perhaps not. It was hard to tell. In that persistent silence, something funny seemed to have happened to time anyway.

Not to mention space, or at least the part defined by the dish. There was still no overflow, not so much as a drop spilling over the side, and yet I could see the surface of the blood collected in it, reflecting the old woman's face like a red mirror.

This time the doctor pulled the lance out and left it on the dish, which then floated upward as if to deliberately move itself out of the way. No one looked at it. The nurse on the woman's left removed the blood pressure cuff from the wall and wrapped it around her upper arm while the doctor started

to examine her. Suddenly it was all very ordinary except for the dish hovering in mid-air with the lance lying in it.

And the silence, which was really beginning to bother me. Was this the only way I could witness this ritual, to see it but not hear anything? And what kind of ritual was it—a healing ritual, or a blood offering to an especially obscure medical demigod, or something else I couldn't imagine at all?

The dish began to glow more brightly again; in a minute, the light would be blinding. The doctor lifted her hands to it and it floated down into them. She picked up the lance and held it close to her face. A bead of blood was shining on the point. The doctor touched her thumb to it and then used the same thumb to trace a triangle on the old woman's forehead. The woman closed her eyes and collapsed against the raised bed, unconscious, as the doctor turned away to wrap the lance in the towel on the tray table. On the other side of the bed, the nurse bent over to kiss the top of her head. Nice, I thought, taking a good look at him for the first time. This certainly gave a new dimension to personal care. Then I noticed the doctor was looking at him as well, in an expectant way. The nurse shrugged and turned to the nurse at the foot of the bed, who was making some notes on a patient chart. Not being able to hear them was frustrating, as was having them ignore me so thoroughly. I had to remember the ignoring trick, I thought; under the right circumstances, it could be quite effective...

The dish began moving away from the bed, leaving the room exactly the same way it had come in. The light it gave off was blinding but I managed to see a little more this time. I tried to touch it as it passed but it eluded my fingers and sailed out into the hall. A moment later, as I tried to readjust my vision, I saw the back of the male nurse pulling the door shut behind him. His back was pretty nice, too.

My ornament shifted in his chair but didn't wake. *Little man, you've had a busy day?* And more than one of those, by the look of him. His sleeping face had no real repose in it, as if all his troubles had followed him into unconsciousness so he could wrestle with them in his dreams. Which was exactly how things were with him, no doubt. But what else could the poor boy do? Just wait and hope for the best, of course, but it couldn't be easy for him. I still owned him, even unconscious.

"It'll be okay now," I said to him. Or tried to. I sensed my voice, but I couldn't actually *hear* it. Oh, Christ, I thought, irritated; wouldn't you know that the accident would have deafened me. Well, it wasn't as if I couldn't reverse it, but it was annoying to have yet one more thing to do.

I started to get back into bed and then saw it was occupied. There was a moment of confusion—wishful disorientation, I'd guess—in which I thought I'd gotten all turned around and I was back on the old woman's side of the room. But it wasn't the old woman in that bed. It was me.

Well, that explained the silence, I thought, staring at myself.

I didn't look good. Of course, the tracheotomy tube didn't help appearances, even if it was letting me breathe more easily. My body tended to shudder and sigh on the exhalations, as if I were suffering for every breath. It wasn't peaceful, like the old woman. No wonder the ornament looked so upset, even in sleep. I wasn't able to tell him there was no suffering, no discomfort. Not even any sound, just nothing.

Nothing? Was that really true, I thought suddenly, or was there nothing only where I was...which was *not* where my body was.

And, come to that, why wasn't I? If I wasn't in the healing place any more, I had no reason to be anywhere else but within the corporeal.

Maybe I'd slipped out inadvertently when that strange dish had floated in—power called to power, and all that. It made sense. So all I'd have to do would be to figure out how to slip back in again. Maybe retracing my steps would do it. I tried, moving as if I were still corporeal and it was all just a matter of getting back into bed again after all.

It didn't work. I could sense the body around me like a strong electrical or magnetic field, but I wasn't *in* it. A matter of concentration, I decided hopefully, and I was concentrating hard and heavy when the nurse came in and exposed the feeding tube in my stomach.

It was a different nurse, and she was just making sure I was clean, I guess; anyway, at the sight of the feeding tube, I went crazy. It wasn't any worse than seeing a tube coming out of my neck, though of course it wasn't any easier, either. I think it was just that the two of them together were too much. I ran back and forth screaming and yelling—or I would have been screaming and yelling if I could have made a sound—while the nurse bent over me and my ornament shifted again in the chair, still looking troubled.

After a bit—quite a bit, I think—I pulled myself together, ashamed at being so squeamish over my own body and found that the ornament had woken up and was talking with the nurse. No—he was listening while the nurse talked to him.

The ornament did have a name: Gus, short for Augustus. Gus the ornament. Right. If I could remember, that had to mean I wasn't really *gone*. Naturally, I couldn't hear a thing the nurse was saying to him, and trying to read her lips in the semi-darkness was just an exercise in frustration. But at least I could see by her face that she was being kind, while Gus was being polite. Not yet the totally helpless lump he would become if I didn't find out how to slip back into my life soon.

She beckoned to him. He got up and leaned over me, taking my hand and stroking it. Trying to pull me back. I wanted to run up and down screaming and yelling again. *Power calls to power, Gus*, I thought sourly. *Power pulls*

power. Get me some of that stuff you slept through and then try me—

And suddenly, I felt him touching me. Or *almost* felt him. It was like feeling the faint vibration of a radio running on the last drop of juice in a used-up battery, just before it dies altogether. I tried to seize the feel of him and hang onto it, build a bridge out of a thread, but there just wasn't enough.

Power calls to power.

I turned away from the sight of him bent over my inert form and found myself standing next to the old woman's bed. She was slumped against the raised portion of the mattress, eyes closed; her bandaged arms made her look like a failed suicide. There was no trace of the triangle the doctor had drawn on her forehead with her own blood. I began to wonder if I'd dreamed or hallucinated the whole thing as part of the situation I was in.

Then she opened her eyes and looked at me with that same expression of benign serenity.

Shocked, I waved both hands in front of her face to see if she was really looking at me. She didn't draw back but her expression faded slightly, as if my actions had unsettled her. She didn't see me, I realized, but she *sensed* me...sensed *something*, at least.

I tried touching her and that unsettled us both. It was as if I were oil and she were water, with a layer of plastic wrap between us just to make sure things stayed impossible. For a little while, I fumbled around while she sat looking bewildered. Then she reached for the drawer on the night stand. There was a pen, but the only paper was a box of tissues. The felt-tip pen wouldn't write on the box, and made big blotches on the tissues. She gave up and wrote on the sheet in big, unsteady letters:

DR. GOWAN
YOU

It was meant to help. I just wasn't sure how. I moved back to my own bed. Gus was still standing beside me, holding my hand and stroking it from the palm out to each finger. And I tried, very hard, but I couldn't feel a thing.

The pinpoint swelled gradually to a brilliant, deep red bead. For a moment, it hung distended from the point of the lance; then it fell heavily into the tube the doctor was holding. No one held the lance. It floated above the table in the lab, a sight that would have made me giddy if I'd had anything to be giddy with. Hell of a lot of floating equipment in this hospital, I thought, watching another drop of blood form on the tip of the lance. Well, all right, only two things, a dish and a lance, but that was probably two more than any other hospital in the country. The dish was nowhere to be seen, or sensed; the power was concentrated in the lance now.

Or rather, the power was concentrated in the blood that came drop by drop out of the point. Gowan and the two nurse accomplices flanking her

watched intently. The woman on her left had a rack of empty tubes they apparently hoped to fill; in front of the man was a rack empty except for one tube, capped, labeled, and half-full.

It was a slow process but nobody was in a hurry. The nurses had the look of people who were equally prepared to wait hours or days. Gowan's face showed the same feelings mixed with a kind of urging, as if it were her own concentration that produced the blood. It's the kind of expression you see on the faces of people who believe that their prayers can be answered if they say them right.

Except Gowan wasn't praying; like the old woman in my room, she *knew*. It wasn't faith, but hope—hope that the power, whatever it was, would choose to work for her.

As the lance continued to bleed, I could sense the slowness of the process extending outward; as long as the lance was active, time in the hospital passed more slowly, and not at the same rate in every location—it was slowest here and in the immediate vicinity, and dissipated farther away. Somehow it would all even out later, though probably no one would notice. Time always seemed warped in hospitals.

It slowed even more with each drop that welled up from that point, I realized. As each drop fell, I could see it shake within itself the way things will do when seen in extreme slow motion. The movement of the nurses' chests as they breathed was all but imperceptible, their eyes like unseeing glass. I thought of my body lying in that room elsewhere in the hospital, Gus running his fingertips along my palm, the old woman sitting up in her bed, and outside in the hall, a different nurse plodding to the desk at the nurses' station, caught in a shift that seemed endless. Only I was outside the effect.

Correction: only I and Gowan.

Her eyes gave her away; she blinked slowly, but not slowly enough. It wasn't humanly possible to move that slowly, and when I realized, I wondered why she was bothering, what she hoped it would do. I moved in close to her, studying her nondescript, middle-aged face. She looked like anybody, everybody, somebody. Not a secret person, but someone who had become privy to a realm of secret people and had to deal with it, because there was no one else to do it.

Her Name should have become known to me then, but somehow, the lance obscured it. That was disturbing. I hadn't really been looking to divine it, and I certainly didn't want to say it, but the fact that it was obscured from me meant that quite a lot was out of kilter, at least where I was concerned, and it wouldn't be put right until I got back into my body and woke up.

For that to happen, I realized, I needed some of that blood. And as soon as I realized that, I also realized that Gowan could see me.

Not *see*, exactly, but *perceive*, I amended. Gowan could perceive that I

was there. Only I wasn't supposed to know.

But why not? I wondered, as another drop of blood swelled so slowly that it was literally painful to watch, even with nothing that could feel any literal pain. The drop took hours to detach from the point, days to splash down in the tube in the doctor's hand.

Gowan didn't move and I knew it had ended. The lance had produced as much as it could for now: three tubes, counting the one she was still holding. Not a lot of return considering how much blood they'd taken from the old woman sharing my room, perhaps half a pint, total—but, I was sure, very potent.

And now, who would get it? Who would benefit? I could tell this was a familiar dilemma for Gowan as she finally capped the tube and put it in the mostly empty rack with the other two. She pulled a clean white towel out of a drawer under the table and raised it to the lance, cradling it for a few moments before wrapping it up. I felt the change in the power; suddenly it wasn't floating any more, and she was carrying it to a cabinet across the room. I had a glimpse of the dish as she put the lance on the shelf next to it.

The two nurses hadn't moved; they were still caught in the slow-down. Gowan didn't pay any attention to them as she grabbed a handful of disposable syringes and then stuck the three tubes of blood in the breast pocket of her jacket. At least they didn't float, too, I thought as I followed her out.

I'd known that she was going to visit the children's ward. Half the contents of one tube went into an IV connected to a too-skinny three-year-old, asleep or comatose. After a long period of pacing through the ward, the rest went to a husky ten-year-old with a head injury. Caught in the temporal slowdown, no one there noticed; from their perspective, Gowan probably hadn't been there long enough to register visually.

Time was moving a little faster in the intensive care unit, but then I imagined that was probably true normally. Time was something nobody had much of in intensive care. After considerable thought, Gowan passed up one cardiac case and dosed another in the next room. That took an entire tube, leaving one. My room was on the next floor up. I stepped in front of Gowan as she headed for the stairs.

I know you know I'm here, I thought at her as she pushed along, pretending she felt nothing. *I know what you can do; please help me.*

Pretending was a serious effort now. Her forehead wrinkled unhappily as her gaze came to rest on me, or whatever she perceived of me.

It'll work. Just help me get out of here and no one will ever know about any of this.

She stopped at the door leading to the stairs and leaned against the wall

with a weariness I could practically feel as a tremor in the ether. The elegant hands covered her face for a moment and then smoothed back her graying brown hair as she looked up at the exit sign over the door.

"Nobody knows," she whispered to the sign. "*Nobody* knows. Even my nurses forget afterwards, until I need them again. It's a deal with God. Make your own deal. We all have to."

She shoved through the door and stumped down the stairs. I thought of going after her to work on her some more. It was the last thing I thought about for a while.

I came back to awareness in my hospital room. Not a bit like waking up; more like a switch flipped from off to on. I was looking up at Gus from a vantage point somewhere near the floor. He was asleep in that chair again, the blanket rumpled and probably smelly as well—he looked like he needed a bath. He also looked like he wasn't going to get one until I woke up.

And if I never woke up? How big a tragedy would that be, I wondered. Subtracting one secret person would leave a remainder of: one helpless possession who would probably spend the rest of his life sleeping on sidewalk grates. Anything else? Two parents, but they were so busy with each other I doubted they'd become aware of my absence for a long time. So, what else, then? Could I honestly say that the universe would be thrown out of balance if I weren't in it? This universe, at least?

The universe doesn't suffer from a lack of anyone; I didn't have to prove it needed me, I just had to want to be in it badly enough to stick. Which meant making sure someone else wanted that as much as I did. Or even, if possible, more.

Years from now, I'll tell someone the story of how Lassie saved me from drowning, I thought, concentrating.

Gus woke with a start and looked over at the bed where my body was still huffing and sighing.

I did call your name, but not from there.

The uneasy expression on his face deepened as he sat up straighter and looked around.

Wait, I thought at him, it gets weirder.

If I'd told him to wait for Armageddon, he would have started doing crossword puzzles. This wasn't supposed to take quite as long. After an hour of nothing but waiting, I was the impatient one; he was uneasy, knowing something else was wrong, but not knowing what.

Power calls to power: come in, power.

Nothing.

I thought of the old woman in the next bed and then, like before, found myself beside her. She was unconscious, lying back against the raised

mattress as if she had been tossed there and forgotten. The covers were jumbled around her hands, but I thought I could see bruises on her wrists in the semi-dark. Perhaps they were just shadows.

Wait, I told Gus again—needlessly, but it made me feel better—and went in search of Dr. Gowan.

She was alone in her little laboratory domain, passed out on a roll-away cot. This was the goddamnedest hospital, I thought; what wasn't levitating was unconscious. Or comatose, like me. I knew what she was trying to do—apparently, she had much less understanding of the power than I'd realized.

Seriously disapprove, doctor. This won't damp the power, it doesn't depend on you. And what if somebody needed you, not in a way that called for a miracle but just some plain old medicine to practice, what then?

The sense of my thoughts reached her where she had taken herself. She couldn't bring herself back, of course and that just about summed up humans for me: once they get anywhere, they're through.

Goes double for secret people, said a voice in my mind suddenly. Test it out sometime.

Not right now, thanks all the same. I hovered over the doctor on the narrow cot, concentrating until her trail became visible to me and I could follow.

I think it comes of the human condition—the modern human condition, anyway—that when humans are actually able to go elsewhere, they usually have to be incapacitated by some kind of drug so potent as to be toxic to them. And rather than finding their way to one of their superficial notions of paradise, they somehow instinctively head for exile in the dead ends of nowhere.

The doctor had put herself in solitary in what she thought of as nowhere. She hadn't bothered to visualize her idea; it reminded me of being under a restaurant-style covered-dish. Or maybe hospital-style was more like it, considering the circumstances.

She knew me right away, but it took a little while to get past her pretending she was too poisoned/intoxicated to perceive or understand. That was embarrassing for her as I'd known it would be but I couldn't allow her to indulge in her feelings about being caught in a blatant lie.

Time to sober up, straighten out, and come home, Dr. Gowan. I can guarantee your miracle will work for me. I want to go home and live my life. I need to find home and figure out what my life is, I can't do that with a tube in my throat and another in my stomach.

Nowhere became Dr. Gowan as a good setting will show off a gem. Because it wasn't just nowhere, I realized, but Entropy itself, and Dr. Gowan

saw herself as a one-person battalion dedicated to beating back Entropy in its most insidious forms: disease, injury, death. She was blessed with the perfect weapon, the ultimate magic bullet, and no shortage of people to use it on. But, like all good things, there just wasn't enough of it to go around.

So instead of being able to walk through her hospital as its resident savior-healer, she spent part of her time engaged in triage and the rest of it hoping she had chosen well. No human should have been forced to carry that kind of burden, I thought in a veritable seizure of self-righteousness; if I had been offered this thing, I was sure I would have refused it.

Because you're not a doctor. I'm a doctor—a real doctor. No real doctor would refuse the chance to be a healer. She turned restlessly in her realm of nothingness, resisting the urge to leave and not wanting to stay there all at once.

Better have a dose of your own medicine, doctor. Like the saying goes, Physician, heal—

Myself? Her laughter pelted me like small, hard stones. *Can't. That's part of the deal with God, you see...that I never, ever partake, that I never use it for my own benefit. If I get hit by a truck, if I have a heart attack, if I get cancer or AIDS, it's just too bad for me. Someone else will come along who'll make a deal with God and keep it.*

Not a healer but a custodian. A real doctor for a custodian. It wouldn't have been enough for certain secret people I could think of, who would never settle for being only a conduit. But then, that type didn't usually turn up as healers, either, and most likely for that very reason.

And while we're at it, whatever offer you did accept seems like a good enough burden for anybody. Even you, whoever you are, and whatever. Secret people, what's that? What can you do besides have out-of-body experiences and make some young guy too handsome for his own good keep a vigil like a lapdog?

In confronting me, she made the nothingness into a territory. The geographer's instincts I had inherited from my mother the traveler kicked in and within moments, I knew her territory better than she did. And being a knower, as soon as I knew that, I knew her Name.

If it had not been for my experience with Gus, I might have been foolish enough to Name her on the spot. Name 'em and claim 'em, as the saying goes—was there a saying like that?—except the claiming is the catch. I was still in the process of finding out what it meant for me to have claimed Gus back in Seattle; I didn't need to complicate things with another acquisition.

Especially not this one. I didn't know how I'd do having absolute control over her the way I did Gus. In its own way, it might have been as bad as my parents, irretrievably locked in their dance of death together, each watching for signs that the other might be weakening. No, this would be different, but

just as bad, I could practically see it. Having had some power herself, she would understand far better than Gus what she had lost to me, and no opportunity to club me with it would ever, ever go unused. If she were to give up everything to me, she would make sure she leaned on me deliberately, without let-up, until I broke, or she ran out of demands, whichever would come first. I knew damned well what that would be.

However, she didn't know any of that *yet*, and that meant she could be bluffed. Instead of Naming her, I *almost* Named her; I took it to the brink, letting her see the process by which I could divine her Name and then stopping short—as far as she could tell, anyway. I let her know that I could go on to divine her Name, tell it to her, and take her; but if I chose, she could rush in and learn her own Name herself.

The implication was that if she cooperated with me and gave me the blood so I could wake up, I'd let her be privy to her own Name. For some reason, this made her unhappy. Instead of moving to shield her Name from me—actually possible, but only temporarily—she left it where it was and let go of the nowhere-turned-territory as she allowed consciousness and her world to come back.

"The blood," she said, opening the cabinet doors, "is payment from the ones who benefited in the past. The old woman in your room, she was helped. So she kept her part of the deal and allowed her forearms to be pierced and her blood taken. '*This is my body; this is my blood.*' Mean anything to you?"

A knower can know a lot of things, but that doesn't mean there aren't empty spaces as well. Religious ritual was one of those for me.

"It's all right. You'll be part of the communion, too; you'll give back the blood. It takes a lot of blood, it takes—" she paused with the rolled-up towel in her hands as the dish sailed slowly out of the cabinet and hovered almost a foot above her eye level. "It takes a lot of blood." The dish started moving through the room toward the door. Gowan turned to look in my general direction with a funny smile-frown on her face. A square-shaped face, very solid, very plain, and somehow looking much younger now. "You can't stop the process once it's begun, so you shouldn't even try. Remember that."

I remembered that every moment the lance was in a three-year-old forearm, impossibly big and crude. The child stayed quiet while she watched. Only later, as we were leaving did she start to cry, but it was someone else's job to console her.

She took everything up to my room and woke Gus to help her. He was cooperative enough, if suspicious. Gowan kept looking at him as if she couldn't believe he was for real, which was rather amusing in someone who took levitating objects and miracle cures for granted. Or possibly instructive—i.e., she probably wasn't going to be the last person I'd meet who

could believe in anything except the commitment of one person to another.

But then again, you couldn't call Gus's situation a commitment, exactly, could you? Commitment implied something entered into voluntarily, and with the expectation of it being reciprocated. Gus, on the other hand, had lost his soul because he'd been careless with it and I had been just as careless in claiming it. But if that was the only way I could have gotten any help out of him to save my own life, then good for me and I could call what I'd done to him inadvertent foresight instead of carelessness or arrogance.

Gowan held a syringe under the lance and it seemed to me that the blood dripped a bit more quickly from the point this time, or maybe it was just that the time distortion wasn't as marked. Gus wasn't affected by it, something that she found unnerving but not worth commenting on.

The syringe was three-quarters full when the blood stopped. She capped it, set it aside, and took another empty one from her coat pocket. Before she could even get it open, the lance dropped down on the bed. For a long moment, she could only stare at it, startled. Then she picked it up and set it carefully in the dish, which was on the night stand.

"I guess that's everything and you get it all tonight," she said to my body, still shuddering and sighing. She didn't bother to swab the crook of my arm with alcohol, just uncapped the needle and slid it in. "Everything," she said over her shoulder to Gus.

I thought of the old woman then and went to have a look at her. But the other bed in the room was stripped and empty; there had been no one there recently.

Something funny that had happened with time...

And then I understood—

The cool grey mist hit me in the face like a blow from a ghost as I got out of the car. There were flashing blue and red lights all around, disembodied voices calling to each other and a strange pain in my throat that was fading even as I became aware of it.

"I said, are you sure you're all right?" The police officer seemed to congeal out of the mist. I moved past him to the front of the car. The wheels on the right side had gone off the road onto the soft shoulder. Through the windshield, I could see Gus sitting motionless in the front seat with both hands on the dashboard as if he had to anchor it. His expression was beyond terror. Perhaps I should feed his denial, I thought, tell him he had a dream; I would have to decide that later. The police officer was saying something to me.

"...only one in the line of cars that didn't plow into that jack-knifed truck. If you're sure you're okay, I don't mind telling you they could use some blood donors up at the hospital. The supply there is pretty depleted and this

was a real bloody one—”

I had to ask him for directions, since I hadn't been awake for the first trip.

It was noisy, crowded, and chaotic at the hospital. They gave Gus a number and sent him to wait in a room with fifty other people. Me, they ushered directly to a laboratory—two nurses, that is, a man and a woman—where the doctor was waiting.

“It so happens we have a serious need for your type,” she said, sitting me down at a table, “which is, as I guess you know, rather rare.” She cleaned my arm herself. Nearby, I could see the usual equipment for drawing a pint of blood; no lance, no dish.

“What happened?” I said.

“Big accident on the highway,” she said. “Tractor-trailer jack-knifed and overturned. Your blood, however, we’ll be giving to a little girl in the children’s ward. We were completely out. You showed up at just the right moment.”

I put my free hand on my neck. “Not quite what I meant.”

“Oh?” She bent over my arm with her back to me. “What *did* you mean?”

“I think you know.” Anyone who walked in would have seen a long plastic tube leading from my arm to a plastic bag. I couldn’t see, but I could feel how the lance was stuck through my forearm just below the wrist. It didn’t really hurt that much.

“Actually, it’s a little late to ask,” Gowan said in a low voice. “Certain questions you have to ask at the proper time. Like when there’s something to ask about. Because sometimes, there can be as much power in the asking of a question as in the answer.” She looked over her shoulder at me, her body still blocking the sight of my arm. “You didn’t know *that*, did you? If you’d asked the right questions at the right time, something quite...*unusual* would have happened. You might even have called it miraculous.”

“What?” I asked.

She shook her head. “It’s hard to say. So many healings. So many lives saved. Perhaps ultimately, an end to suffering.”

“That sounds a bit grandiose to me,” I said.

“Does it?” She moved aside and I saw the lance piercing my arm. “I guess it does. I guess that’s why it makes such a good bed-time story in the children’s ward. Children love stories that have miraculous, happy endings.” She pulled the lance out and plunged it through my other arm. I didn’t feel at all weakened, but I could feel what she was actually trying to draw from me, and it wasn’t blood.

“When it’s distilled,” I said, “you’ll get a drop about the size of a fingernail. Give it to someone who believes in miracles.”

Her face was cold. “I made a deal with God—”

“/didn’t. But if God ever wants to make a deal, God knows where to find

me.” I pulled the lance out of my forearm and handed it to her. “*Without a go-between.*”

“I wanted more,” she said darkly.

“Even if I would give you more, this is all you’ll be able to use. Even miracles have limits.” I looked over at the nurses standing near the door. It was hard to tell if they were aware or not. “How many years ahead was I seeing in that room?”

“Many,” she said. “So many lives saved, so many healing. And you didn’t suffer. You were comatose most of the time and we took good care of you.” She gave a short, hopeless laugh. “I remember a future that never was.”

“You remember a dream you had,” I corrected her. “Sorry, but I had to wake up. It wasn’t my dream. Or my deal. Or my God.”

I turned away from her and headed for the door.

“I just wanted to do some good,” she called after me.

“Next time,” I said, “ask for volunteers.”

I collected Gus from the donor waiting room; they let him go without question. He didn’t say anything, of course, since his vow of silence was still in effect, but I could feel him looking at me for miles.

“It’s okay,” I said finally. “I paid it back. It wasn’t my deal, but I didn’t walk off with something for nothing anyway. Besides, what do you think would have happened to you if I’d let myself become that old woman in the bed?”

He just kept looking at me and for a moment, I saw what he’d been seeing during that time, the decades spent free and on his own, subject to no one. Another one who’d had a dream that didn’t belong to him.

I sighed. “Not this life. Maybe next time you’ll do it the right way.”

His eyes seemed to plead, but I knew he really didn’t know what to ask for.

▼

i n t r o d u c t i o n t o

DISPATCHES FROM THE REVOLUTION

This is my first attempt at alternative history and it's Mike Resnick's fault. It was also nominated for a Hugo and he has never let me forget it, either.*

*Mike was editing an anthology called *Alternate Presidents*, and insisted that I choose an election year. It was that or have him nudzhe me to death, so I yielded to the temptation to redo the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago.*

Alternative history is hard. My hat is off to geniuses like Howard Waldrop who know and understand history well enough to second-guess how things would be if one event hadn't happened and another one had...event after event after event. I sat with half a dozen books just getting the original facts straight.

And as for the outcome—if it seems farfetched from our present perspective, I'm glad, because at the time—for some of us—it was not. I remember listening to an account of the 1970 shootings at Kent State by a woman who had been teaching there when it happened. "Students came to me afterwards," she said, "and asked me if this was the end of everything. I had to tell them that I didn't know."

**Why I keep calling it alternative history or reality instead of the more commonly-used alternate (e.g., *Alternate Presidents*): Brian Aldiss has since pointed out that alternative is actually the correct term, since alternate means taking turns in sequence, or rotating. Alternate will probably remain in common usage, at least for a while, because it's faster and easier to say, but this is one of those times when I personally value precision over ease of use.*

DISPATCHES FROM THE REVOLUTION

◀ **D**ylan was coming to Chicago.

The summer air, already electric with the violence of the war, the assassination attempts successful and unsuccessful, the anti-war riots, became super-charged with the rumor. Feeling was running high, any feeling about anything, real high, way up high, eight miles high and rising, brothers and sisters. And to top it all off, there was a madman in the White House.

Johnson, pull out like your father should have! The graffito of choice for anyone even semi-literate; spray paint sales must have been phenomenal that summer. The old bastard with a face like the dogs he lifted up by their ears would not give it up, step aside, and graciously bow to the inevitable. He wuz the Prezident, the gaw-damned Prezident, hear that, muh fellow Amurricans? *Dump Johnson, my ass, don't even think about it, boys, the one we ought to dump is that candy-assed Humphrey. Gaw-damned embarrassment is what he is.*

And the President's crazy, that's what he is, went the whispers all around Capitol Hill, radiating outward until they became shouts. *Madman in the White House—the crazy way with LBJ!* If you couldn't tell he was deranged by the way he was stepping up the bombing and the number of troops in Viet Nam, his conviction that he could actually stand against Bobby Kennedy clinched it. Robert F. Kennedy, sainted brother to martyred Jack, canonized in his own lifetime by an assassination attempt. Made by the only man in America who was obviously crazier than LBJ, frothed-up Arab with a name like automatic weapons fire, *Sirhan Sirhan, ka-boom, ka-boom.*

The Golden Kennedy had actually *assisted* in the crazed gunman's capture, shoulder to shoulder with security guards and the Secret Service as they all wrestled him to the floor. Pity about the busboy taking that bullet right in the eye, but the Kennedys had given him a positively lovely funeral with RFK himself doing the eulogy. And, needless to say, the family would never want for anything again in this life.

But Johnson the Madman was going to run! Without a doubt, he was a dangerous psychotic. Madman in the White House—damned straight you didn't need a Weatherman to know the way the wind blew.

Nonetheless, there *was* one—after all, hadn't Dylan said the answer was blowin' in the wind? And if he was coming to Chicago to support the brothers and sisters, that *proved* the wind was about to blow gale force. Storm coming, batten down the hatches, fasten your seatbelts, and grab yourself a helmet, or steal a hardhat from some redneck construction worker.

Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement already had their riot gear. Seven years after the first freedom ride stalled out in Birmingham, the feelings of humiliation and defeat at having to let the Justice Department scoop them up and spirit them away to New Orleans for their own protection had been renewed in the violent death of the man who had preached victory through non-violence. He'd had a dream; the wake-up call had come as a gunshot. Dreaming was for when you were asleep. Now it was time to be wide-awake in America...

Annie Phillips

"There were plenty of us already wide-awake in America by *that* late date. I'd been to Chicago back in '66, two years to the month in Marquette Park. If I was never awake any other day in my life before April '68, I was awake *that* day. Surrounded by a thousand of the meanest white people in America waving those Confederate flags and those swastikas, screaming at us. And then they let fly with rocks and bricks and bottles, and I saw when Dr. King took one in the head. I'd thought he was gonna die that day and all the rest of us with him. Well, he didn't and we didn't, but it was a near thing. After, the buses were pulling away and they were chasing us and I looked back at those faces and I thought, 'There's no hope. There's really no hope.'

"When Daley got the court order against large groups marching in the city, I breathed a sigh of relief, I can tell you. I felt like that man had saved my life. And then Dr. King says okay, we'll march in Cicero, it's a suburb, the order doesn't cover Cicero. *Cicero*. I didn't want to do it, I knew they'd kill us, shoot us, burn us, tear us up with their bare hands and teeth. Some of us were ready to meet them head-on. I truly believe that Martin Luther King would have died that day if Daley hadn't wised up in a hurry and said he'd go for the meeting at the Palmer House.

“Summit Agreement, yeah. Sell-Out Agreement, we called it, a lot of us. I think even Dr. King knew it. And so a whole bunch of us marched in Cicero anyway. I wasn’t there, but I know what happened, just like everybody else. Two hundred dead, most of them black, property damage in the millions though I can’t say I could ever find it in me to grieve for property damage over people damage. Even though I wasn’t there, something of me died that day in Cicero and was reborn in anger. By ’68, I had a good sized bone to pick with good old Chi-town, old Daley-ville. I don’t regret what I did. All I regret is that the bomb didn’t get Daley. It had his name on it, I put it on there myself, on the side of the pipe. ‘Richard Daley’s ticket to hell, coach class.’

“Looking back on it, I think I might have had better luck as a sniper.”

Excerpt from an interview conducted covertly at Sybil Brand, published in *The Whole Samizdat Catalog*, 1972? exact date unknown

Veterans of the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley also knew what they were up against. Reagan’s tear-gas campaign against campus protestors drew praise from a surprising number of people who felt the Great Society was seriously threatened by the disorder promoted by campus dissidents. The suggestion that the excessive force used by the police caused more problems rather than solving any was rejected by the Reagan administration and its growing blue-collar following alike.

By the time Reagan assumed the governorship, he had already made up his mind to challenge Nixon in ’68. But what he needed for a serious bid was the southern vote, which was divided between Kennedy and Wallace. Cleverly, the ex-movie actor managed to suggest strong parallels between campus unrest and racial unrest, implying that both groups were seeking the violent overthrow and destruction of the government of the United States. Some of the more radical rhetoric that came out of both the student left and the civil rights movement, and the fact that the student anti-war movement aligned itself with the civil rights movement only seemed to validate Reagan’s position.

That the southern vote would be divided between two individuals as disparate as Robert F. Kennedy and George C. Wallace seems bizarre to us in the present. But both men appealed to the working class, who felt left out of the American dream. Despite the inevitable trouble that Wallace’s appearances resulted in, his message did reach the audience for which it was intended—the common man who had little to show for years, sometimes decades of hard work beyond a small piece of property and a paycheck taxed to the breaking point, and, as far as the common man could tell, to someone else’s benefit. Wallace understood that the common man felt pushed around by the government and exploited this feeling. In a quieter era, he would have come off as a bigoted buffoon; but in a time when blacks and students were

demonstrating, rioting, and spouting unthinkable statements against the government, the war, and the system in general, Wallace seemed to be one of the few, if not the only political leader who had the energy to meet this new threat to the American way of life and wrestle it into submission.

Some people began to wonder if McCarthy hadn't been right about Communist infiltration and subversion after all...and that wasn't Eugene McCarthy they were wondering about. By the time of the Chicago Democratic Convention, Eugene McCarthy had all but disappeared, his student supporters a liability rather than an asset. They undermined his credibility; worse, they could not vote for him, since the voting age at that time was a flat 21 for everyone...

Carl Shipley

"I hadn't been around Berkeley long when the Free Speech Movement started. Like, the university, Towle, Kerr, all of them were so out-to-lunch on what was happening with us. They thought they were dealing with Beaver Cleaver and his Little League team, I guess. And with us, it was, 'Guess what, Mr. Man, the neighborhood's changing, it ain't Beaver Cleaver any more, it's Eldridge Cleaver and Wally just got a notice to report for his physical and maybe he doesn't want to go get his ass shot off in southeast Asia and maybe we've had enough of this middle-American conservative bullshit.' That's why they wanted to shut down Bancroft Strip. That was the first place I went to see when I got there and it was just like everybody said, all these different causes and stuff, the Young Republicans hanging in right along with the vegetarians and the feminists and people fund-raising for candidates and I don't know what-all.

"So we all said fuck this shit, you ain't closing us down, we're closing you down. And we did it, we closed the university down. We had the power and we kept it—and then in comes Ronald Reagan two years later in '66 and he says, Relax, Mr. and Mrs. America, the cavalry's here. I know you're worried about the Beave, but I've got the solution.

"He sure did. By spring 1968, a lot of campus radio stations all over California were off the air and the campus newspapers were a joke. No funding, see. And by then, everyone was too sick of the smell of tear gas to fight real hard. That was Reagan's whole thing—sit-ins and take-overs weren't covered by the right of free assembly, they were criminal acts. Unless you had to be in a building for a class, you were trespassing. I got about a mile of trespassing convictions on my rap sheet and so do a lot of other people. And Mr. and Mrs. America, they were real impressed the way Reagan came down on the troublemakers.

"Sure were a *lot* of troublemakers. Too many to keep track of. That's what happened to me, you know. Got lost in the court system. The next thing

I knew, it was 1970, and nobody remembered my name, except the guards. And they could remember my number a lot easier. Still can.

“The thing is, I *never* burned my draft card. That was a frame-up. I wouldn’t have burned it. I was ready to go to Canada, but I intended to keep my draft card. As a reminder, you know. And not even my parents believed me. By then, I’d been into so much radical shit, they figured everything the pigs said about me was true.

“But the fact is, everything I owned was in that building when it burned. So of course my draft card burned up with it! But I never set that fire. My court-appointed lawyer—this is me laughing bitterly—said if I told my ‘crazy story’ about seeing off-duty cops with gasoline cans running from the scene just before the explosion, the judge would tack an extra five years on my sentence for perjury. I should have believed him, because it was the only time anyone told me the truth.

Interview conducted at Attica, published in *Orphans of the Great Society*, Fuck The System Press, 197? (circulated illegally in photocopy)

Some say, even today, that Reagan wouldn’t have taken such an extremist path if Wallace hadn’t been such a strong contender. Nixon’s mistake was in dismissing Wallace’s strong showing, choosing to narrow his focus to the competition within his own party for the nomination. This made him look dinky, as if he didn’t care as much about being President as he did about being the Republican candidate for President. That would show those damned reporters that they couldn’t kick around Dick Nixon, uh-huh. Even if he lost, they’d have to take him seriously; if he actually won, they’d have to take him even more seriously. Which made him look not only dinky, but like a whiner—the kind of weak sister who, for example, might stand up in front of a television camera and rant about cocker spaniel puppies and good Republican cloth coats, instead of telling the American people that rioting, looting, and draft-card burning would no longer be tolerated. Even Ike’s coattails weren’t enough to repair Nixon’s image, and Ike himself was comatose or nearly so in Walter Reed after a series of heart attacks.

The Republican National Convention was notable for three things: Rockefeller’s last minute declaration of candidacy, which further diluted Nixon’s support, the luxuriousness of the accommodations and facilities, and its complete removal from the rioting that had broken out in Miami proper, where an allegedly minor racial incident escalated into a full-scale battle. The convention center was in Miami Beach, far from the madding Miami crowd, a self-contained playground for the rich. You couldn’t smell the tear gas from Miami Beach, and the wind direction was such that you couldn’t hear the sirens that screamed all night long...

“Carole Feeney” *[this subject is still a fugitive]*

“I told everybody it was the goddam fatcat Republicans that we ought to go after, not the Democrats. But Johnson the Madman was running and everyone really thought that he was going to get the nomination. I said they were crazy, Kennedy had it in the bag. But Johnson really had them all running scared. I tried talking to some of the people in the Mobe. Half of them didn’t want to go to either convention and the other half were trying to buy *guns* to take to Chicago! Off the pigs, they kept saying. Off the pigs. Jesus, I thought, the only pig that was going to get offed was Pigasus—the real pig that the Yippies were going to announce as the candidate from the Youth International Party. That was cute. I mean, really, it was. I said, let’s go ahead and do that somewhere in California, film it and send the film to a TV station and let them run it on the news. Uh-uh, nothing doing. Lincoln Park or bust. Yeah, right—Lincoln Park *and* bust. Busted heads, busted bodies, busted and thrown in jail.

“So I wasn’t going to go. Then I found out what Davis was doing. I couldn’t believe it—Davis Trainor had been in on everything practically from the beginning. He was real good looking and real popular, he had this real goofy sense of humor and he always seemed to come up with good ideas for guerrilla action. He actually did all the set-up work on the pirate radio station we ran out of Oakland and he worked out our escape routes. Not one of us got caught in the KCUF caper. We called it our Fuck-You caper, of course.

“Then I’m doing the laundry and I find it—his COINTELPRO I.D.—stuffed into that little bitty pocket in his jeans. You know, it’s like a little secret pocket right above the regular pocket on the right. The one thing I always hated about the movement was that it was as sexist as the Establishment. If you were a woman, you always got stuck doing all the cooking and the cleaning up and the laundry and stuff. Unless you were a movement queen like Dohrn. Then you didn’t have to do anything except make speeches and get laid if you wanted. Oh, they threw us a sop by letting us set up our own feminist actions and stuff, but we all knew it was a sop. We kept telling each other that after we changed things, it would be different and for now, we’d watch and listen and learn. Besides, everyone knew that the Establishment wouldn’t take women as seriously as they would men. I wonder now how much any of us believed that—that it would really be different, that we could change things at all.

“Anyway, I went straight to the Mobe with my discovery, but it was too late—Davis discovered his pants were missing and he’d already split. I *really* didn’t want to go to Chicago after that, but the alternative seemed to be either stay home and wait to get busted, or go to Chicago and get busted in action. I was still enough of an idealist that they talked me into Chicago.

If I was going to get busted, I might as well be accomplishing something, and anyway, after the revolution, I'd be a National Heroine, and not a political prisoner.

"So, the revolution's come and gone and here I am. Still working for the movement—the feminist movement, that is. What little I *can* do, referring women with unwanted pregnancies to safe abortionists. Yes, there *are* some. Not all of us were polysci majors—some of us were pre-med, some of us went to nursing school. It costs a goddam fortune, but I'm not getting rich on it. It's for the risk, you know. You get the death penalty in this state for performing an illegal abortion. I could get life as an accessory, and there was a woman in Missouri who *did* get death for doing what I'm doing.

"Nobody in my family knows, of course. Especially not my husband. If *he* knew, he'd probably kill me himself. Odd as it sounds, I don't hate him...not when I think what good cover he is, and what the alternative would be if I didn't have such good cover..."

Part of a transcript labeled "Carole Feeney" obtained in a 1989 raid on a motel said to be part of a network of underground "safe houses" for tax protestors, leftist terrorists, and other subversives; no other illegal literature recovered

The source of the DYLAN IS COMING! rumor never was pinpointed. Some say it sprang into being all on its own and stayed alive because so many people wanted it to be true. And for all anyone knows, perhaps it actually was true, for a little while anyway; perhaps Dylan simply changed his mind. The more cynical suggested that the rumor had been planted by infiltrators like the notorious Davis Trainor, whose face became so well-known thanks to the Mobe's mock wanted poster that he had to have extensive plastic surgery, a total of a dozen operations in all. The poster was done well enough that it passed as legitimate and was often allowed to hang undisturbed in post offices, libraries, and other public places, side by side with the FBI's posters of dissidents and activists. One poster was found in a Minneapolis library as late as 1975; the head librarian was taken into custody, questioned, and released. But it is no coincidence that the library was audited for objectionable material soon after that and has been subject to surprise spot checks for the last fifteen years, in spite of the fact that it has always showed 100 percent compliance with government standards for reading matter. The price of a tyrant's victory is eternal vigilance.

This was once considered to be the price of liberty. Nothing buys what it used to.

Steve D'Alessandro

"By Sunday, when Dylan didn't show, people were starting to get angry.

I kept saying, well, hey, Allen Ginsburg showed. Allen Ginsburg! Man, he was like...*God* to me. He was doing his best, going around rapping with people, trying to get everybody calmed down and focused, you know. A whole bunch of us got in a circle around him and we were chanting *Om, Om*. I was getting a really good vibe and then some asshole throws a bottle at him and yells, *Oh, shut up, you fag!*

"I went crazy. Sure, I was in the closet then because the movement wasn't as enlightened as some of us wished it were. The FBI was doing this thing where it was going around trying to discredit a lot of people by accusing them of being queer, and everybody caught homophobia like it was measles. I ain't no fairy, no, sir, not me, I fucked a hundred chicks this week and my dick's draggin' on the ground so don't you call *me* no fag! It still stings, even when I compare it to how things are now. But then, I don't expect any kind of enlightened feeling in a society where I have to take fucking hormone treatments so I won't get a hard-on when I see another guy.

"Anyway, I found the scumbag that did it and I punched him out. I gave *him* a limp wrist. I gave him *two* of them. And I know I had a lot of support—I mean, a lot of straights admired Ginsburg, too, even if he was gay, just on the basis of *Howl*, but later, a bunch of Abbie's friends blamed me for creating the disturbance that gave the police the excuse they needed to wade in and start busting heads.

"Sometimes I'm afraid maybe they were right. But Annie Phillips told me it was just a coincidence. About me, I mean. She said they came in because they saw a black guy kissing a white girl. I guess nobody'll ever really know for sure, because the black guy died of his injuries and the white girl never came forward.

"I prefer to think that's what made Annie and her crowd go ahead with the bomb at the convention center. I don't like to think that Annie really wanted to blow anybody up. It was kind of weird how I knew Annie. Well, not weird, really. I probably owed Annie my life, or damn near, and so did a certain man of African-American descent. We were lucky it was her that walked in on us that day. She was enlightened, or at least tolerant, and we could trust her not to say anything. I didn't think she liked white people too much, but I'd heard she'd been with Martin Luther King a couple of years before on those marches and I couldn't blame her. Anyway, she couldn't give me away without giving away the brother, but to this day, I believe it really didn't matter to her—homosexuality, that is. Maybe because the Establishment hated us worse than they hated blacks.

"Anyway, I wasn't intending to be in the crowd that crashed the gate at the convention center on Wednesday. Nomination day. We'd been fighting in the streets since Monday and Daley's stormtroopers were beating the shit out of us. Late Tuesday night, the National Guard arrived. That's when we

knew it was war.

“On Wednesday, we got hemmed in in Grant Park. People were pouring in by then, and nobody had expected that. It was like everyone was standing up to be counted because Dylan hadn’t, or something. Anyway, there were maybe ten-twelve thousand of us at the band shell in the park, singing, listening to speeches, and then two kids went up a flagpole and lowered the flag to half mast. The cops went crazy—they came in swinging wild and they didn’t care who they hit or where they hit them. I was scared out of my mind. I saw those cops close up and they looked as mad as Johnson was supposed to be. On the spot, I became a believer like I’d never been before—Madman in the White House and Madman Daley and his Madman cops. It was all true, I thought while I curled up on the ground with my hands over my head and prayed some kill-crazy pig wouldn’t decide to pound my ass to jelly.

“Somebody pulled me up and yelled that we were supposed to all go to in front of the Hilton. I ran like hell all the way to the railroad tracks along with everybody else and that was where the Guard caught us with the tear gas. Man, I thought I was going to die of tear-gas suffocation if I didn’t get trampled by the people I was with. Everyone was running around like crazy. I don’t know how we ever got out of there but somebody found a way onto Michigan Avenue and somehow we all followed. And the Guard followed after us. Somebody said later they weren’t supposed to, but they did. And they weren’t carrying pop-guns.

“Well, we ran smack into Ralph Abernathy and his Poor People’s Campaign mule train and that was more confusion. Then the Guard waded in and a lot of Poor People went to the hospital that night (it was after seven by then). I’ll never forget that, or the sight of all those TV cameras and the bright lights shining in our eyes. We were all staggering around when a fresh busload of riot cops arrived, and that’s another sight I’ll never forget—two dozen beefy bruisers in riot gear shooting out of that bus like they were being shot from cannons and landing on all of us with both feet and their billyclubs. I lost my front teeth and I was so freaked I didn’t even feel it until the next day.

“I was freaked, but I was also furious. We were all furious. It was like, Johnson would send us to Viet Nam to be killed or he’d let us be killed by Daley’s madman cops on the Chicago streets, it didn’t matter to him. I think a lot of us expected the convention to adjourn in protest at our treatment. At least that Bobby Kennedy would speak out in protest against the brutality. The name Kennedy *meant* human rights, after all. Nobody knew that Kennedy had been removed from the convention center under heavy guard because they were all convinced that someone would make another attempt on his life. I heard that later, before they clamped down on all the information. He was about to get the fucking *nomination* and he was on his way back

to his hotel. They said Madman Johnson was more like Mad-Dog Johnson over that, but who the fuck knows?

"George McGovern was at the podium when we busted in. I hadn't really been intending to be in that group that busted in, but I got carried along and when I saw we were going to crash the amphitheater, I thought, what the fuck.

"I almost got crushed against the doors before they gave, and I barely missed falling on my face and getting run over by six thousand screaming demonstrators. And the first person I saw was Annie Phillips.

"I thought I was in a Fellini film. She was dressed in this godawful *maid's* uniform with a handkerchief around her head mashing down her Afro, but I knew it was her. We looked right into each other's eyes as I went by, still more carried along with the crowd than running on my own and she put both hands over her mouth in horror. That was the last time I saw her until she was on TV.

"I managed to get out of the way and stay to the back of the amphitheater itself. I just wanted to catch my breath and try to think how I was going to get out of all this shit without getting my head split open by a crazy Guardsman or a cop. I was still there when the bomb went off down front.

"The sound was so loud I thought my ears were bleeding. Automatically, I dropped to the floor and covered my head. There was a little debris, not much, where I was. When I finally dared to look, what I saw didn't make any sense. I still can't tell you exactly what I saw. I blocked it out. But sometimes, I think I dream it. I dream that I saw Johnson's head sitting on a Texas flagpole. I'm pretty sure that's just my imagination, because in the dream, he's got this vaguely surprised-annoyed expression on his saggy old face, like he's saying, *Whut the fuck is goin' on here?*

"Anyway, the next thing I knew, I was out on the street again, and somebody was crying about they were bombing us now, along with the Viet Nameese. Which was about the time the Guard opened fire, thinking we were bombing them, I guess.

"I was lucky. I took a bullet in my thigh and it put me out of the action. Just a flesh wound, really. It bled pretty impressively for a while and then quit. By then, I was so out of my head that I can't even tell you where I staggered off to. The people who found me in their front yard the next morning took care of me and got me to a hospital. It was a five-hour wait in the emergency room. That was where I was when I heard about Kennedy."

Part of the data recovered from a disk taken in a raid on an illegal software laboratory, March, 1981

Jack Kennedy had died in the middle of a Dallas street, his head blown off in front of thousands of spectators and his horrified wife. Bobby

Kennedy had narrowly missed meeting his end during a moment of triumph in a Los Angeles hotel. Ultimately, that seemed to have been only a brief reprieve before fate caught up with him...

Jasmine Chang

"Everyone heard the explosion but nobody knew whether it was something the demonstrators had done, or if the National Guard had rolled in a tank or if the world had come to an end. I ran down to the lobby with just about everyone else on the staff and a good many of the hotel guests, trying to see what was happening outside without having to go out in it. Nobody wanted to go outside. That night, the manager on duty had told us that anyone who wanted could stay over if we didn't mind roughing it in the meeting rooms. I made myself a sleeping bag out of spare linens under a heavy table in one of the smaller rooms. The night before, the cops had cracked one of the dining room windows with a demonstrator's head. I wasn't about to risk my neck going out in that frenzy.

"Well, after the explosion, we heard the rifle fire. Then the street in front of the hotel, already crowded, was *packed* all of a sudden. Wall-to-wall cops and demonstrators, and the cops were swinging at anything they could reach. They were *scything* their way through the crowd, you see—they were mowing people down to make paths so they could walk. It was one of the worst things I've ever seen. For awhile it was *the* worst. I wish it could have stayed that way.

"The lobby was filling up, too, but nobody really noticed because we were all watching that sickening scene outside. The whole world was watching, they said. I saw a camera crew and all I could think was their equipment was going to get smashed to bits.

"I don't know when Kennedy came down to the lobby. I don't know why the Secret Service didn't stop him, I don't know what he thought he could do. He must have been watching from his window. Maybe he thought he could actually address the crowd—as if anyone could have heard him. Anyway, he was there in the lobby and none of us really noticed him.

"The demonstrator who forced his way into the revolving door—he was just a kid, he looked about fifteen years old to me. Scared out of his mind. The revolving door was supposed to be locked, but when I saw that kid's face, I was glad it wasn't.

"Then the cops tried to force their way in after him but they got stuck, there was a billyclub jammed in the door or something. And the kid was babbling about how they'd blown up Kennedy at the convention. 'They threw a bomb and killed Kennedy! They blew him up with Johnson and McGovern!' he was yelling over and over. And Bobby Kennedy himself rushed over to the kid. I'm pretty sure that was the first any of us really

noticed him, when it registered. I remember, I felt shocked and surprised and numb all at once, seeing Kennedy right *there*, right in the middle of a lobby. Like he was anybody. And nobody else moved, we all just stood there and stared like dummies.

“And Kennedy was trying to tell the kid who he was, that he wasn’t dead and what bomb and all that. The kid got even more hysterical, and Kennedy was shaking him, trying to get something coherent out of him, we’re all standing there watching and finally the cops manage to get through the revolving door.

“They must have thought the kid was attacking Kennedy. That’s all I can figure. Even if that’s not how they looked. The cops. They looked...*weird*. Like they didn’t know what they were doing, or they did know but they’d forgotten why they were supposed to do it. I don’t know. I don’t *know*. But it was so weird, because they all looked exactly alike to me right at that moment, even though when I looked at them again after, they weren’t anything alike, even in their uniforms. But they looked like identical dolls then, or puppets, because they moved all at once together. Like a kick-line of chorus girls, you know? Except that it wasn’t their legs that came up but their arms.

“I know that when they raised their guns, they were looking at the kid, and I thought, ‘No, wait!’ I tried to move toward them, I was reaching out and they fired.

“It was like another bomb *had* gone off. For a moment, I thought another bomb had gone off, just a split second before they were going to fire. Then John Kennedy—I mean, Bobby, *Bobby* Kennedy—that’s a Freudian slip, isn’t it?—he did this clumsy whirl around and it looked like he was turning around in anger, like people do sometimes, you know? Like he was going, ‘Dammit, I’m leaving!’ And then he went down, and it was so awful because—well, this is going to sound really strange, I guess, but...well...when you see people get shot on a TV show, it’s like choreographed or something, they do these kind of graceful falls. Kennedy was...they’d robbed him of his dignity. That’s the only way I can think to put it. They shot him and humiliated him all at once, he looked clumsy and awkward and helpless.

“And I was outraged at that. I know it must sound weird, a man got shot, *killed*, and I’m talking about how he looked undignified. But that’s like what taking someone’s life is—taking their humanity, making them a *thing*. And I was outraged. I wanted to grab one of those cops’ guns and make *them* into *things*. Not just because it was Bobby Kennedy, it could have been anyone on that floor at that moment, the kid, the manager, my supervisor—and I hated my supervisor’s guts.

“Right then, I understood what the demonstrations were about, and I was against the war. Up until then, I’d been kind of for it—not really *for* it, more

like, 'I hate war, but you're supposed to serve your country.' But right then, I understood how horrifying it must be to be told to make somebody into a thing, or be told you have to go out and risk being made into a thing. To kill, to be killed.

"All that went through my mind in a split second and then I started screaming. Then I heard this *noise*...under my screams, I heard this weird groan. It was Kennedy. They say he was dead by then and it must have been the air going out of his lungs past his vocal cords that made the sound. Awful. Just awful. I ran and pulled the fire alarm. It was the only thing I could think to do. And this other chambermaid, Lucy Anderson, she started pounding on the front windows and screaming, 'Stop! Stop! They killed Kennedy! They killed Kennedy!' Probably nobody could hear her, but even if anyone had, it wouldn't have mattered, because most of the people out there thought Kennedy was already dead in the explosion.

"It wasn't the Fire Department that used the hoses on those people. The cops commandeered the fire trucks and did that. And we were stuck in that hotel for another whole day and night. Even after they cleared the streets, they wouldn't let any of us go anywhere. Like house arrest.

"The questioning was awful. Nobody mistreated me or hit me or anything like that, it was just that they kept *at* me. I had to tell what I saw over and over and over and over until I thought they were either trying to drive me out of my mind so I wouldn't be able to testify against those cops, or trying to find some way to make it seem like *I* was really the one who'd done it.

"By the time they told me I could leave the hotel, I was mad at the world, I can tell you. Especially since that Secret Service agent or whoever he was told me I'd be a lot happier if I moved out of Chicago and started over somewhere else. He really screwed that one up, and it was lucky for me he did. I left, and I was far, far away when the shit really hit the fan. I started over, all right—I got a new name and a new identity. Everybody else who was in that lobby—Lucy Anderson, the manager, the other staff and guests—they all disappeared. The last anyone saw of them, the Secret Service was taking them away. The cops vanished, too, but I have a feeling they didn't vanish to quite the same thing as the others. And the kid killed himself. *They* said. Right, sure. I bet he couldn't survive the interrogation.

"Of course, all that was a long time ago. Hard to imagine now how things were then. I was only twenty, then. I was working days and taking college courses at night. I wanted to be a teacher. Now I'm in my early forties, and sometimes I think I dreamed it all. I dreamed that I lived in a country where people *voted* their leaders into office, where you just had to be old enough and not be a convicted felon and you could vote. Instead of having to take those psychological tests and wait for the investigators to give you a voting

clearance. It is like a dream, isn't it? Imagining that there was a time in this country when you could *be* anything you wanted to be, a teacher, a doctor, a banker, a scientist. I was going to be a teacher. I was going to be a history teacher, but those are mostly white people. My family's been in this country forever, but because I'm Oriental, I've got conditional citizenship now...and I was *born* here! I suppose I shouldn't complain. If anyone found out I saw Kennedy get it, I'd probably be unconditionally dead. Because *everyone knows* that the rumor that Kennedy was shot by some cops with a bad aim in a hotel lobby is just another stupid rumor, like the second gunman in Dallas in 1963. *Everyone knows* Kennedy died in the explosion at the convention center. That's the official version of how he died and it's the official version, government certified, that's the truth.

"Where I live, they have routine segregation, so I can't use any of the whites' facilities. I've thought about applying to move to one of the larger cities where there's elective segregation and nothing's officially 'white-only,' but I hear the waiting lists are years long. And somebody told me that everything is really just as segregated as here, they're just not as open and honest about it. So maybe I'd really be no better off...

"But I wish that I could have become a teacher—any kind of teacher—instead of a cook. I can't even become a chef, because that's another men-only field. I don't *want* to be a chef necessarily, because I really don't like to cook and I'm not very good at it. But it was all I could get. The list of available careers for non-whites gets smaller all the time.

"Sometimes, I think it actually wasn't meant to be this bad. Sometimes I think that nobody really wanted the military to take over the government for real, I think it was just panic about so many of the Democratic candidates dying along with the President in that blast and the rioting that wouldn't stop and all that. It did seem as if the country was completely falling apart and somebody had to do something fast and decisive. Well, sure somebody should have. Somebody should have figured out who was the President with Madman Johnson and Humpty Humphrey and all those Senators dead—there had to be *somebody* left, right? All of Congress wasn't there. I mean, if I'd known, if a lot of us had known how things were going to come out, I think we'd have just let Ronald Reagan be President for four years, run him against Wallace or something and kept free elections, instead of postponing the elections and then having them abolished.

"People panicked. That's what it all came down to, I think. They were panicking in the streets, they were panicking in the government, and they were panicking in their homes. Our own panic brought us down."

Undated typescript found in a locker in the downtown San Diego bus terminal, April 9, 1993

Our own panic brought us down. For many who were eyewitness to certain events of 1968, this would seem to be a fitting coda, if coda is the word, for the ensuing twenty-five years...

Oh, hell, I don't know why I'm bothering to try to sum this up. How do you sum up a piece of history gone wrong? How do you sum up the fall of a country that believes it was saved from chaos and destruction? And who am I asking, anyway? I'm out of the country now, another wetback who finally made it across the border to freedom. There was a time when wetbacks went north to freedom, but I'm pretty sure nobody would remember that now. Mexico is sad and dusty and ancient, the people poor and suspicious of Anglos, though I'm so brown now that I can pass convincingly as long as I don't try to speak the language—my accent is still atrocious.

But the freedom here—nothing like what we used to have, but the constraints are far fewer. You don't need to apply for a travel permit incountry, you just *go* from place to place. Of course, it's not really that hard to get a travel permit in the US, they give them out routinely. But I'm of that generation that remembers when it was different, and it galls me that I would have to apply for one at all if I want to go from, say, Newark to, say, Cape May. I've deliberately chosen two cities I've never been to, just in case these papers fall into the wrong hands. God knows enough of my papers have been lost over the years. Sometimes I think it's a miracle I haven't been caught.

It's a hell of a life when you're risking prosecution and imprisonment just for trying to put together a true account of something that happened two and a half decades before.

Why I bothered—well, there are a lot of reasons. Because I've learned to love truth. And because I want to atone for what I did to "Carole Feeney" and the others. I'm still amazed that she didn't recognize me, but I guess twenty years is a long time after all.

I really thought I was doing the right thing at the time. I thought infiltrating the leftist groups was all right if it was just to make sure that nobody was stockpiling weapons or planning to blow up a building. Or assassinate another leader. I truly wish I could have arrested Annie Phillips and her group long before Chicago. Some of the people I talked to who were in the streets that night blame Annie for everything that's happened since, and I think that's why the authorities kept her alive instead of killing her—so the old radicals could hate her more than the government.

After I talked to Annie, I understood why she turned violent, even if I didn't condone it. If her voice could have been heard in 1964, maybe all these voices could be heard now, though they might not have so much to say...

How melodramatic, "Davis." I can't help it. I was actually just like any of them in the year 1968—I thought my country was in trouble, and I was trying to do something about it. And—

And what the hell, we won the Viet Nam war. Hooray for America. The Viet Nameese are all but extinct, but we brought the boys back home. We sent them right back out to the Middle East, and then down to Nicaragua, and to the Philippines, and to Europe, of course, where they don't protest our missile bases much any more. That big old stick. We've gone one better than talking softly and carrying a big stick. Now we don't talk at all...

In the weeks since I finally got out of the country, I've been having this recurring dream. I keep dreaming that things turned out differently, that there was even just one thing that didn't happen, or something else that did happen, and the country just...went on. And so I keep thinking about it. If Johnson hadn't run...if no one had been killed in Cicero four years before...if Reagan hadn't used so much force on campus. If someone hadn't thrown a bottle at Allen Ginsburg. If that bomb hadn't gone off. If Kennedy hadn't been killed. If Dylan had showed up.

If Dylan had showed up...I wonder sometimes if that's it. God, the world should be so simple. Instead of simple and brutal and crude.

Even after putting together this risky account, I'm not sure that I really know much more than I did in the beginning. I was hoping that I might figure it all out, how, instead of winning the battle and losing the war, we won the war and lost everything we had.

But it could have been different. I don't know why it's so important to me to believe that. Maybe because I don't want to believe that this was the way we were going no matter what. I don't want to believe that everything that was of any value is stuck back there in the 60s.

Papers found in a hastily vacated room in an Ecuadorian flophouse by occupying American forces during the third South American War, October 13, 1998

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i n t r o d u c t i o n t o
NO PRISONERS

*When Mike Resnick first told me he had decided to edit an anthology called *Alternate Kennedys*, I thought he was pulling my leg. I mean, wouldn't you? Maybe you think I'm pulling your leg, but I'm really not—Tor Books published *Alternate Kennedys* in 1992 as well as the previously mentioned *Alternate Presidents* and together the two volumes make quite a compelling exercise in alternative history.*

Since the focus of this anthology was nominally so much narrower, I decided this required some more farfetched initial changes. At the same time, according to my research, none of what I have here is actually that farfetched, with the possible exception of the life I gave Ted Kennedy. Joe Kennedy did indeed make such a statement concerning his daughter's political acumen and, although Ted Kennedy was actually not one of the group who met Ghandi, Patricia did impress the Indian leader.

Okay, the portrayal of Robert Kennedy is probably pretty farfetched, as well, but I also attended Catholic school—not that one—and I saw similar things happen to even less likely people. So don't scoff if you haven't put in as much church time as RFK and I have.

One final note: this is the first appearance of the complete text. Just before original publication, Tor's legal department quailed at a line about Daniel Berrigan and it was removed, even though the line in question refers to a completely fictional incident. I have restored it. It's no big deal—watch for Father Berrigan's reaction to a certain legal motion—but I'd rather have it in there than not.

NO PRISONERS

If everyone in the family, Senator Kennedy thought, staring at the TV screen, Bobby was the most photogenic. Or perhaps the word was telegenic. The camera loved him in a way that surpassed even Jack. Jack's charisma and confident leadership had always lent his image great warmth, but the fact of his attractiveness was more of an afterthought. The press routinely referred to Ambassador Kennedy as glamorous, and that was certainly true. The Senator's own press adjective was *striking* and the thought was a wry smile: some kind soul with a thesaurus, as some other less kind soul had said once. But Bobby—the first thing you saw was his pure physical beauty. As if he were a movie star. To the press, he was the Golden Kennedy.

The old man had always thought the press was just rubbing it in. Perhaps he was right, in a few cases—Joseph P. Kennedy was hardly the beloved figure of American politics that poor, lost Jack had been. Not that Joe had ever sought that for himself, nor, really, for his children—not as such, anyway. But everyone in the family knew that the old man had believed, deep in his secret, idealistic heart of hearts, that if his children did what was right, the love of the American people would follow.

The Senator sat back in the easy chair, still smiling, though the smile had become somewhat wistful now. And so, had that come true? For Jack, it was certainly so now. Jack was forever frozen in 1963. It would be a long, long time before any other US president inspired the affection that Jack had. Never mind his enemies—they had all been more or less neutralized by an assassin's bullet. Martyr status conferred sainthood, rightly or wrongly, and

Jack would be a near-impossible act to follow, even for the other Kennedys themselves. If any of them had any presidential aspirations, anyway.

And who was there? The old man himself had all but come right out and said the dream was over. That would have been galling, but they all knew it wasn't a statement of no-confidence on his part, just an assessment of reality. Joe Kennedy had always had faith in his children; they all knew it and had worked hard to justify that faith. In the end, the old man had been as much bewildered as gratified. Only Jack and Jean had fit the scheme of things.

We always loved you deeply, Dad, thought the Senator, *but you taught us too well.* The former Attorney General, now Senator Kennedy wasn't supposed to have been named Eunice. Ambassador Kennedy wasn't supposed to have been Patricia. And Father Robert Kennedy wasn't supposed to have *been*, at all.

Father Robert Kennedy, S.J., if you please. The old man blamed their mother for that. He'd wanted all the children to have a public school education, so they'd be able to get along with all kinds of people. But Rose had insisted on sending Bobby first to St. Paul's and then to the Priory, and when Joe had tried to send him to Milton Academy, Bobby had dug in his heels and refused.

What's the matter with you, don't you want to go to Harvard? the old man had demanded.

No. I want to go to Poughkeepsie. Like a silly child's smarting off.

And what in God's name is in Poughkeepsie? the old man had thundered at him.

The seminary. In God's name, yes.

You could read the old man's thoughts in his face just as clearly as if they had appeared over his head in a neon word-balloon. *Now we'll never have a Kennedy in the White House!*

He had turned his anger on all of them, but she and Patricia had borne the brunt. *You middle children—always looking out for each other! You've been in collusion from the beginning!*

Well, truthfully, Dad? Yes. From the moment we all knew what we wanted, we knew we'd have to stick together because half the battle would be you. That was the answer she had never made aloud because she hadn't dared speak to her father that way then (or even now, even if he hadn't been so ill). But she really hadn't had to. She'd have just been telling him something he'd already known, and Joe Kennedy wasn't one for wasting words. Privately, she thought that, on some deeper level, the old man felt a certain...contentment, perhaps. He could blame Rose for Bobby's entering the priesthood, and he could blame her and Patricia for igniting the feminist movement. That satisfied his need for visible causes.

How he had howled when she had declared for the Eleventh Congressional District back in '46! His girls had been raised to be good wives to politicians, not politicians themselves. Her win had shut him up, though, and paved the way for Patricia. Thank God—if she had not run, Patricia might have decided to suppress her own aspirations. She might even have married that British movie star who had been chasing her so earnestly. But she and Bobby had managed to put the kibosh on that by convincing Jack to take Patricia as well as Teddy with him on the trip from Israel to Japan in 1951. If Patricia had ever been considering giving it all up, the encounter with Nehru had clinched her decision to enter diplomatic service. Sandwiched between Jack and Teddy, she alone had commanded Nehru's attention with her intelligence and her incisive questions on Viet Nam and Communism. "He snubbed us for Pat," Teddy had written home. "We bored him; she fascinated him. Upstaged by a pretty girl."

Not hardly, Teddy, Eunice thought, still amused. So much for Teddy Kennedy, Boy Diplomat, and just as well. He made a much better businessman than he ever would have made a politician. The boy just liked to entertain too much (way too much); better that he did it in his own chain of resorts than in public office. When you paid your staff off to keep quiet, it was called *Christmas bonuses*, not *bribes*.

Poor Teddy. Bobby would have disapproved of her thoughts and called her uncharitable, as he did whenever she made even the faintest criticism of the so-called Wildest Kennedy's behavior. *Teddy never could get enough attention, let alone approval*, Bobby had said once. *He came along too late. He couldn't be a war hero like Joe, Jr. or Jack. You and I and Patricia were busy taking turns making the old man mad. Kick died and Rosemary...well. Jean had the Good Child spot sewed up. All that was left for Teddy was getting sick, hurting his back in accidents, and going to parties.*

Family, Eunice thought. *The gift that keeps on giving.* Well, she'd make some allowances for Teddy, but she was never, ever going to like that Leona Helmsly woman he'd married after divorcing Joan, and not just because the woman was twelve years his senior. Teddy had to know that had been a terrible mistake and thank God he'd waited until after Jack's election to make it.

The TV screen snapped her back to the present by showing her a close-up of Bobby's smiling, laughing face. The Golden Kennedy, indeed—he had never looked more so. Black smoke suddenly obscured his face, which gave her a start; it always did, even though she had seen this footage dozens of times, or so it seemed. The way the smoke went in front of him made it look as if he, too, were burning.

The camera drew back to show Bobby standing next to Daniel Berrigan. The image froze, became the page-one snapshot that was the latest marker

on the Kennedy landscape. Like her own victory speech after her first win, like Jack's inauguration, like the Zapruder frames and Jackie standing next to LBJ as he was sworn in, like John-John saluting at Jack's funeral, this one would never die. The Picture From Catonsville, everyone called it. Like the Creature From The Black Lagoon, a monster you couldn't tear your eyes away from.

Anti-War Priest-Activist Kennedy Assists in the Burning of Draft Records With Home-Made Napalm.

If that sight hadn't killed the old man, Eunice thought, he would probably live forever.

She hadn't been terribly prepared for it herself, though she had seen some kind of big demonstration coming, given Bobby's activism with the Berrigans & Co. Looking back on it, she should have seen something coming as soon as he'd fallen in with Daniel Berrigan back in Poughkeepsie. Philip had come a little bit later, but as soon as he had, it had been as if a circuit had been completed. As if Bobby had discovered in them his true brothers.

Well, they were a little closer to his own age, but that was only part of it. Because the Berrigans *were* brothers, they were to Bobby the epitome of what he had missed being the odd man out in a (mostly) political family—brothers in fact as well as brothers in Christ.

The Berrigans had been equally drawn to Bobby and this had made her suspicious at first. She had cultivated suspicion during the time young men had pursued her—young men with big political aspirations, all of them, looking to grab the brass ring by marrying into the Kennedy family. Actually, she hadn't had to cultivate much suspicion about her own desirability; she'd have had to have been in a coma not to see. But the Berrigans...what could they possibly want? They were the furthest thing from Vatican game-players that existed; they made headlines now, but that hadn't been the case back when they had hooked up with Bobby.

You just don't understand yet, Bobby had told her gently. Maybe someday you'll meet other senators who stand for all the things you stand for, and then you'll see. Philip and Daniel don't just talk human rights. They live human rights.

Sure did. She'd had them investigated, discreetly but thoroughly, feeling glad of that Kennedy power advantage and yet at the same time, a little bit guilty for some reason. And the Berrigans had turned out to be what they appeared to be—a couple of do-gooding priests who had come out of hardship, acting on their beliefs. No aspirations to be cardinal or bishop or even official Kennedy chaplains. Philip's order, the Josephites, were dedicated to serving the needs of American black people, While the Jesuits were, as ever, the Jesuits.

In the end, she'd had to conclude that Bobby's alliance with the Berrigans and, subsequently, the peace movement, had an awful lot in common with her own alliance with the feminist movement—they were both getting what their family had, with few exceptions, not been able to give: acceptance.

Well, that was mostly Joe; Rose, too, to a certain extent, though she seemed to make more of an attempt to understand her wayward children. As for the rest of them—it wasn't really that Teddy hadn't accepted as much as his being just too distant in age, he'd been too young to be an ally. Jean had never expressed disapproval, but she was the next youngest and vying to be everything Joe and Rose wanted her to be. Jack had had to distance himself from Bobby for the sake of the election—the fact of his Catholicism had been handicap enough and without Joe Kennedy's machine, he probably could never have brought it off.

By comparison, she had been much less of a thorn in the campaign's side. She had been expected to deliver the women's vote, and she had, by God, done it and done it big. Jack had had to tread very cautiously around some of the more explosive issues like abortion, however; it had helped that Jackie had been pregnant.

And then Jack had surprised her by offering her the Attorney General's spot. It was unheard-of, unprecedented, unbelievable, and her first impulse had been to turn it down flat, feminism be damned. It was one thing to stand up for what you believed in, but quite another to face down the whole country with something it might not be ready for.

"I'd be like the cricket that attacked the lawn mower," she'd said to Jack. "Incredibly brave, completely lacking in judgment."

"You think *I'm* completely lacking in judgment?" Jack had asked her with a smile.

She'd looked around the Oval Office. "Up till now you've been batting a thousand, I guess. But this is no time to go kamikaze."

He flashed the smile, that famous Kennedy smile that she had seen on every face in her family, including her own. "The Kamikaze Kennedy—this could be a whole new image for me. After all, we have to look ahead to '64."

"Jack."

"All right, all right. Look, I'm serious, Eunice. I can't think of a better person for Attorney General. You know what Dad used to say about you? He used to say that if you'd been blessed with balls, you'd own this country."

She'd burst out laughing at that one.

"He was right, too. Of all of us, you were the one with the best head for politics, and you still are."

Her laughter wound down. "Maybe that's true. And maybe I know when the time isn't right to force the issue of a woman Attorney General. Maybe

after the '64 election—if you win—”

“That’s not the way you thought back in ’46, Eunice. Was the time right to force the issue of a woman candidate for the Eleventh Congressional District? You didn’t even have the feminist movement backing you up then, because there was no such thing! *You* brought it about—the first strong Kennedy woman who wasn’t somebody’s mother or wife or sister, you made that happen. You won the Eleventh with a lot of Rosie-the-Riveters raising hell for you. And you can carry off the Attorney General’s office now. If you’d been thinking like this back in ’46, there probably wouldn’t *be* any feminist movement now. Not the way we know it. You want to live in a country like that?”

His vehemence had startled her. She’d told him she’d have to sleep on it and went straight home to call Bobby.

“Jack wants you for Attorney General? He’s a very smart man. What’s the problem?” he’d said.

“Well, what do you *think* the problem is, Bobby? Don’t you think he’s jumping the gun?”

Even through the tinny phone receiver, his laughter had been musical. All that chanting in Latin, she thought, nonsensically. “Now you sound just like Dad, circa 1946!”

“That’s what Jack said.”

More laughter. “Now, what did you say the problem was? Eunice, what happened to you? With an attitude like that, you could set the feminist movement back twenty years! Don’t you remember your own fair-housing-fair-pay speech from ’47? ‘No quarter given, no compromise, and *no prisoners!*’ Are you a leader, or aren’t you?”

It had burst out of her then before she could stop it. “Bobby, I’m afraid!”

Silence. Not a stunned silence, or a horrified silence, but a reverent silence. The silence of church, of the confessional. Those Catholic reflexes, Eunice thought: talk to a priest, spill your guts.

“*I am* afraid,” she went on. “You’re the only one I could tell that to. I’ve stood up to a lot of opposition over the years, I should be used to it by now, I guess, but...I don’t know. Maybe it’s not the kind of thing you can get used to. And what will Dad say?”

“*Hah!*” Bobby said. “That’s the *real* problem, isn’t it. Well, after he says all the things he usually says after one of us middle-children trouble-makers kicks over yet another apple-cart, he’ll probably say something like, ‘What better person for Attorney General than someone Jack can really trust?’ He doesn’t really *get* feminism, Eunice, but he’s not a cave-man.”

“No, not compared to some senators and congressmen I can think of.”

“Don’t be scared, Eunice.” He paused. “Or, go ahead and be scared, but do it anyway.”

God, but suddenly they were all so idealistic. Where was it coming from? “Easy for *you* to say,” she’d said with a weak laugh.

“Call Patricia, she’ll tell you the same thing. What time is it in New Delhi, anyway?”

“I’m not going to call Patricia. I’ll be all right, I’ll think this out on my own.”

“Do it, Eunice. If Jack didn’t think the country could take it, he wouldn’t have asked you. He needs you. Things are going to get rough in the next few years.”

There had been a little more conversation after that, but she had hung up with those words echoing in her head: Things are going to get rough in the next few years. *What could he have meant by that*, she had wondered. Things had always gotten rough; fate would have to go some to top Joe McCarthy and Roy Cohn.

The next day, a telegram had arrived from Patricia, at the American embassy in India: BEHIND YOU 900 PERCENT STOP STAND TALL STOP NO PRISONERS. She had called Bobby back immediately.

“Is that what you do with the money from the collection box—blow it on phone calls to the other side of the world?”

“No, normally we buy limos with the collection box money, but I figured you were worth the sacrifice. I can do without a new limo for a month if it means my big sister will take the Attorney General’s job. Then she can fix all my parking tickets.” Pause. “Well?”

“Suffer,” she’d said, and hung up. And waited all of five minutes to call Jack and tell him yes, she’d do it.

And it had been tough going at first, but her record and her image had pulled her through. Eunice Kennedy had always been someone to take seriously and those who opposed her on the basis of gender came off looking antiquated and ridiculous.

That had been the good news, Eunice reflected. The bad news had been, the clever ones changed their tactics and found other ways to oppose her. But she had persevered, drawing on reserves of strength she’d never known she had, all the way up to November 22, 1963, when the world as she’d known it had shattered into a million pieces.

So much for idealism. Johnson’s accession to the presidency had been a return to hardball politics reminiscent of the stories she’d remembered her father telling. It was all politics, all the time, and sometimes she wondered if Johnson’s insisting—practically begging—that she stay on had been his way of trying to break her back and, by extension, the Kennedy power.

“If politics is now a matter of trying to determine what form the other fellow’s paranoia is taking, then become an expert on paranoia,” Bobby had told her. “Whatever you have to do to get the job done. And if it’s too much,

get out and go back to the Senate.”

“Sometimes I think I just want to walk away from the whole thing,” she’d told him. “Go into private practice. Or teach.”

“Whatever your conscience tells you,” he’d answered in that maddeningly serene way.

“Thanks a lot, little brother. I hate you.”

“I love you, too, sis.”

Of course her conscience had not let her walk away. She’d caught the idealism disease from Jack and Bobby. It had killed Jack; if Bobby was suffering any ill-effects, he wasn’t saying.

And the feminists had gone from dancing in the streets to marching in the streets, this time to demonstrate against the war in Vietnam—those that weren’t enlisting and demanding to be sent into combat, anyway. She had viewed this development with much alarm. It was only logical, if equal rights were real, but there was something unsavory about it, something sick. Perhaps she was finally meeting the limits of her beliefs as a child of her generation, she’d thought, watching footage of anti-war demonstrators juxtaposed with demonstrations of pro-female-combat demonstrators at the enlistment centers. The country was going schizophrenic and maybe, she’d thought at the time, she was going schizophrenic right along with it. If no compromises, then combat: check one, yes or no. She wavered, trying to find the trick in the question.

And then she went to Bobby and, for the first time, fetched up against a brick wall. “It’s not a trick question, Senator,” he’d said. “It’s just plain wrong to send *anyone* into combat. You know that, and that’s why you can’t resolve it. You *won’t* resolve it until you stop denying that this war is wrong.”

“It’s not that simple,” she’d said and had been about to say more when he cut her off.

“I’ll pray for you, Sis.” The next thing she’d heard was the buzz of the dial tone. Apparently, she had just found Bobby’s limit, too.

His pictures had already started turning up in the news and the press always singled him out for recognition. *Father Robert Kennedy, the Jesuit-priest brother of slain President John F. Kennedy, etc., etc., etc., along with the notorious priest activists Daniel and Philip Berrigan...* The Berrigans would have drawn a crowd by themselves, but Bobby could draw a mob the size of a small village.

“I’m just God’s instrument,” he’d told her in a subsequent phone call. “As God’s instrument I must do His work.” She could always hear the capital letters in his voice when he referred to the deity. “If the name ‘Kennedy’ enables me and the others to do God’s work more effectively—well, His Will be done.”

The phone conversations were becoming less and less frequent now. Bobby was taking part more and more in anti-war actions and he and the Berrigans were getting arrested now. For her, there was the war to think about constantly, and with '68 coming up, she was being pressured two ways: on one side to push for the vice-presidential spot on the Democratic ticket, and on the other, to announce as early as possible that she had no aspirations to the White House, so as not to muddy the issues and split the voting in Chicago. Hell, if Johnson could understand how important it was for a Democratic victory that he not run, she should be able to understand, too, or she so was told.

She found herself going around in a rage most of the time. Her advisors were no help—they all seemed to have their own agendas now and she felt as if they were viewing her more as some kind of tool they could put to use to get what they wanted. Not all of them, certainly, but the fact that they were all so polarized on every issue was yet another source of trouble for her.

While for Bobby it was so damned simple. The war is wrong, discussion closed. In torment, she had called him one night late last year. Instead of the Brother Confessor with the willing ear, she had found a Bobby that was pre-occupied, even short with her.

A few weeks later, she heard that he was to go to Hanoi with Daniel Berrigan. Some American pilots taken prisoner were to be released on Tet, and two Americans had been invited to take them back to the States. Immediately, she made calls. It didn't surprise her when the men refused any and all help with their journey from the government, but she'd felt she'd had to make the effort for them. For Bobby. The prospect of the trip had raised the specter of tragedy; for some reason, whenever she thought of it, the picture of blood-drenched draft-board files rose up in her mind, Philip Berrigan's felony in the name of peace, committed with three others. Why she associated that with Bobby's trip to Hanoi she had never been able to figure out—

Bobby hadn't been involved in that action and Philip Berrigan had been jailed.

Not the act of protest itself, but the blood, she thought; all she could see in her mind was the blood, independent of anything. Blood spilled. It had the feel of a bad omen to her.

Jack...

And then she'd been unable to shake the conviction that Bobby was going to die in some kind of attack. Maybe he would expose himself to danger deliberately—

She'd tried to stop him, but he'd been unmoved by her pleas. Duty; conscience; instrument of God; His Will be done.

Alternately cursing God and Daniel Berrigan, she had seen Bobby off

in New York, convinced it was the last time she would ever see him alive. Then she'd gone back to Washington and, for the first time in years, called Sargeant Shriver. He was long married to someone else by then, some other woman who had been raised to be a politician's good wife and was glad to do it, but their parting had been on good terms and they had remained professional as well as personal friends.

Sarge, bless his heart, had come over immediately and sat up almost all night, listening to her rant, talking her down, and then letting her rant some more and talking her down again.

When footage of the Tet Offensive had come on the news, she had accepted tranquilizers from Ethel Skakel. Ethel had been her right arm almost from the beginning of her political career, but that had been the first time she had ever taken Ethel up on an offer of anything stronger than a vitamin pill. It wasn't lost on her that Ethel took some herself. She'd always suspected that Ethel had had a secret but ultimately futile crush on Bobby.

And what the hell: Bobby had come home after all. She'd gone early to meet his plane, watching the sky with angry defiance, thinking, *You missed, God! You missed!*

But the man who had stepped off the plane wincing under an onslaught of flashbulbs and bright TV lights was a faded shadow of the Golden Kennedy. He looked more like many of the returning combat veterans she had often been called on to welcome home personally—devastated, drained, permanently changed for all time.

For once, she had gotten her way and managed to whisk him away to a borrowed townhouse for rest and recuperation. She'd had to take Daniel Berrigan as well, but she hadn't minded. Nor had she cared that the press was already speculating that her actions meant that Senator Kennedy might possibly be about to align herself with the anti-war movement, unduly influenced by her brother.

While Daniel Berrigan had slept, or tactfully pretended to sleep, they had sat together in the townhouse's shiny kitchen, drinking the tea that Bobby had said a Vietnamese grandmother had given him. It was a bitter brew that she'd had to force herself to drink.

She had been braced to hear all about the trip but oddly, he was not as forthcoming as she had thought he would be. "I cannot tell you," he said over and over. "I cannot begin to describe..." His voice trailed off so that she didn't know what it was that he couldn't describe. "But you saw it on the news. A good part of it. Now if you can imagine, say, Jean's kids, our nieces and nephews, running through the streets, trying to find shelter from the blasts and the fire, the napalm..."

He became a little more animated, expressing his anger at how the American ambassador had intercepted them in Vientiane, Laos and insisted

that the recently-released airmen return to the States on an Air Force plane.

"Politics, Eunice," he said darkly. "You should recognize that. The government war machine could not allow a humanitarian mission. The men had to go home on a *military* plane, the only kind that gets the stamp of approval. Why don't they just stamp FDA-Approved on all the soldiers as well? That's what you do with cattle bound for slaughter, isn't it?"

She rubbed her eyes. "For a minute, I thought that was Daniel Berrigan sitting there."

"Do you know what Daniel calls Vietnam?" He sipped his bitter tea. "The Land Of Burning Children."

"But they're killing our boys as well, Bobby," she said. "You said it yourself. You *saw* it yourself."

"They kill us and we kill them. Show me where is the right in that. Show me where the good is."

"It's not that simple!"

"When did it get so complicated, then? Show me the exact point in time where people suddenly became disposable for the sake of—of *anything*. Show me when and where that became right." He'd looked at her with an expression so sad, she'd found it shocking. "You can't, Eunice. No one can. And I cannot stay with you here, under the auspices of this death-dealing government. Remember, Sis? No prisoners." With that, he had awakened Daniel and they'd left together. And she'd known that his departure had been a final thing between them, that he had not just left her presence but left *her*, as a person, as his sister, as anything and everything she had been to him. Her, and the rest of the family as well.

She had not called anyone that night. Though it had seemed like the longest night she had ever had to get through, she could not remember a thing about it afterwards, whether she had watched television, or tried to read, or just sat at the table until dawn with the dregs of that bitter Vietnamese tea.

The full force of 1968 had hit right after that. The explosion of racial violence after King's assassination seemed to melt into the campus unrest and the anti-war demonstrations until it seemed like there was no city anywhere that was not burning, and she could not tell news footage of Baltimore, Chicago, or even Washington itself from the footage of the cities of the Mekong Delta.

Land of the Burning Children...

Burn, baby, burn...

People continued to fill the streets, marching against the war and for abortion rights and a national daycare system, for the right to take part in combat, for civil rights and integration, for fair housing and a better welfare system, for a fetus's right to life, for truth, justice, and the American way. There were so many of them in so many different groups, so many that came

to her because she was Senator Kennedy, came to demand an answer for everything they saw that was wrong.

Go to Church! she wanted to scream at them. *Go to Church where all the answers are simple, where right and wrong never change places and everybody always knows which is which!*

And then Catonsville. Nine Catholic activists armed with prayerbooks and consciences and home-made napalm—soap-flakes and gasoline. Who would have thought the recipe for *that* would be so simple?

When she had seen the film of it on television, her first thought had been that Bobby looked almost like his old self again. The Golden Kennedy was back. But looking closer, she could see new lines around his eyes and a hauntedness that never completely left his face. But still, he was beautiful. As always.

“...the burning of paper instead of children...” Daniel Berrigan was saying. Bobby said nothing. It was intercut with footage of Philip Berrigan leading a prayer-group in jail, where he had been forced to remain, determined by the court to be a potential fugitive from justice. A brief shot of bloodstained draft-board files, then back to the burning files, and the goose walked over her grave again. Not for the last time.

Her mother had called the next day. Her father was too ill to talk to her, Rose had said, so she was giving Eunice his message. Those damned show-boat Berrigans and thank God they had a Kennedy in the government, unquote from her father.

Even if it's a woman, right, Mother? But she hadn't said that, only listened to the relaying of her father's instructions, knowing that if her father hadn't been incapacitated, he'd have done it himself without a word to her. The Kennedy machine was not finished yet. Perversely, she had to bite her lip to keep from laughing; her mother had a gentle voice that always sounded just a little bit puzzled, not made for the Joseph P. Kennedy kind of tough talk.

When she had finished, Rose had asked her if she was getting enough rest. Eunice had to let herself laugh then. “Go to Church, Mother,” she'd said, when she had recovered. “Just go to Church.

“I will,” Rose had said, sincere. “I'll pray for you and Bobby and all of us.”

She hadn't made any phone calls this time. Instead, she'd gone in person directly to the governor's mansion in Maryland, without an appointment, and was ushered in immediately to see the man with the funny name. She had never thought much of him but, whatever he was, he wasn't dumb. Spiro Agnew had been expecting her.

When she left, she was sure she had left her soul behind along with her promises. And she hadn't even sold it herself, she reflected later. Her father

had sold it for her, without a second thought. Not for her, not even really for Bobby, but for some ancient and mysterious force called *Kennedy*, the word that was interchangeable, in his vocabulary, with *God*.

The hell of it was, she hadn't thought it would fly. Like so many others, Agnew had been working from his own agenda. His conditions—*demands*—had been so absurd, she had come too close to laughing in his face. But it was all absurd to begin with. Her father had sent her on a fool's errand. There would be no Kennedy dynasty, not in this generation, and if Jean's or Jackie's or Ted's children had any political aspirations, the members that made up the old Kennedy machine would be long gone and forgotten by the time they reached their majority. Who knew what politics would look like then, anyway? Ronald Reagan was making noises; maybe in twenty years, the White House would be relocated in Hollywood. *Make movies, not war.*

There could be no beneficiary of Joe Kennedy's manipulations unless it was herself, and she doubted that her father would have gone to such trouble just for her. Maybe he wanted her to believe differently, but she knew better. A dead frog's leg, she decided finally, during the course of another long, sleepless night, with the name *Kennedy* as the current that made it jump reflexively. Joe was doing it for himself, to show that he still could wield that influence and power, to show that he was and always would be stronger than any forces that opposed him, whether it was his own ill-health, or her feminism, or Bobby's priesthood, or Teddy's latest paternity suit.

Agnew surprised her; the initial results were swift. Only a week later, it had been announced that Father Kennedy would be tried separately from the rest of the Catonsville activists. Due to the fame and notoriety of this one defendant, it was felt that neither he nor the other eight could receive a fair trial.

The Catonsville Eight would be tried right there in Catonsville, while Father Kennedy would have a change of venue, perhaps to New York State, which was his actual state of residence. In the meantime, he would stay with his parents while awaiting trial.

The screaming lasted for weeks and almost overshadowed the war itself in the news. There was no broadcast, no magazine, no newspaper, no bar, no smoke-filled back room that was not full of opinions, voiced at high volume, about this latest development with the Golden Kennedy. They were giving him preferential treatment because of his family; they were going to crucify him because of his family; he had bugged out on his brothers and sisters in the peace movement to keep from going to jail; his brothers and sisters in the peace movement had bugged out on him so they wouldn't have to share his stiff sentence; the theories were shouted, printed, broadcast, argued, analyzed, revised, discarded, re-stated, over and over, until it seemed as if the Vietnam War really would have to be put on hold until the matter was

resolved. Counter-motions were made by the Catonsville Eight's lawyers and struck down. Daniel Berrigan drew a short jail sentence for contempt of court when his lawyer had tried to get him separated as well, for spitting on the relevant documents.

Eunice accepted no more tranquilizers from Ethel; just sleeping pills. With sleeping pills, she didn't have to relive everything in her dreams.

She was tempted to take a few now. Just pop a few capsules and let herself nod off in the chair, instead of going upstairs to finish packing for the trip to her parents' home. They were expecting her to keep Bobby under a kind of house arrest and work on him about this anti-war business. And, not coincidentally, keep him buried while a Kennedy-approved lawyer filed motion after successful motion for delays, until so much time had passed between the actual crime and the start of his trial that it would be too much trouble to do anything more to him than put him on probation. That was her father's hope, anyway. With enough money and favors greasing the tracks, who knew but that Bobby's trial might even be delayed until the war was over? And then the charges might be dismissed altogether.

She had to laugh at that one. With Nixon in the White House? And Agnew as Vice President? Maybe her father had gone senile. With Nixon in charge, they'd be lucky if the war didn't last into the '80s. She wished she could have been a fly on the wall when Agnew had phoned Tricky Dick with the news: *I've got the election in my pocket, Mr. Nixon—can I call you Dick? Yes, I think I should, since we're going to be working together very closely...*

She wondered whose idea it had been to keep that one under wraps; speculation about anyone's running mate, including Nixon's, was still running wild. She was going to be watching the Republican national convention on television for certain. While the Democratic one—she'd be lucky to get through it without getting addicted to Ethel's tranquilizers. She was still being pressured to go for the vice-president's spot and perversely, she could feel herself seriously considering it after all. If it was totally hopeless anyway, why not? She feared it might mark her as a loser...or it might, as Ethel kept insisting, shatter the last barrier to the acceptance of a woman candidate for the highest offices. No prisoners.

But Ethel didn't know about the deal. Not yet, anyway. She had been suspicious after Bobby's separation, but so far had said nothing. When the Nixon-Agnew ticket was announced, there was no telling what she would say. Or do. Eunice contemplated the resignation of her oldest and most trustworthy friend and confidante, and took more sleeping pills from her. Hell, maybe Ethel wouldn't quit until late in the evening of the first Tuesday in November.

Another idealist, Eunice mused. She had grown up around idealists and subsequently surrounded herself with idealists; now her own idealism had

died a rather hideous death and there was nothing left to do but disillusion everyone. No prisoners.

Or was there?

Was there time to call the whole thing off? Who was going to object if the Catonsville Eight's lawyers managed to reverse the decision separating Bobby's trial, if it meant more money and favors changing hands? Besides Agnew, of course; he'd end up looking terrible, and good enough for him. Put it back the way it had been, let Bobby take his chances and let her father live with that and to hell with politics altogether—

No. Too late. Reversing the decision would probably only result in chaos and confusion and a trial that could drag until God knew when...1970, 1971, even. With the name *Kennedy* unfavorably in the news every night. That was her name, too, after all and she had a right to keep it good.

Distantly, she heard Ethel calling her from upstairs and her first thought, as always, was that the house was just too damned big for one person and a few part-time live-in staffers. She should get herself a nice apartment somewhere...maybe in that Watergate complex...it was really nice...

"I *said*, will you for God's sakes come *upstairs* and decide what you're going to take with you of your personal stuff? I'm not a mind-reader!"

Something in her voice made Eunice sit up and look at her. She stood in silhouette, holding onto either side of the hallway entrance to the darkened living room. "In a minute," she said thoughtfully. Ethel sounded like she needed one of her own tranquilizers.

"And turn off that television," the other woman added. "Didn't anyone ever tell you you'd ruin your eyes watching TV in the dark?"

"Ethel?" Eunice asked, getting up.

"Turn off that television! Turn it off! *Turn it off!*" Ethel lunged for the TV set, but Eunice caught her and shoved her away. She collapsed on the sofa, burying her face in the cushions, but Eunice was already kneeling in front of the television, turning up the volume.

"...the scene at Catonsville not an hour ago when Father Robert F. Kennedy, the well-known Jesuit activist and brother to the slain JFK, and Senator Eunice Kennedy of New York, drew a large crowd at the very spot where he and eight others were arrested for destruction of draft records two weeks ago. Our correspondent was there..."

Cronkite's grave tones were replaced by the breathless voice of Connie Chung. "The crowds here are willingly staying behind the barricades that Father Kennedy apparently put in place all by himself before the press was called. It is unknown right now whether he called the press, or whether that was one of his confederates. To my right, you can see Daniel Berrigan and the rest of the Catonsville Eight—David Darst, John Hogan, Thomas Lewis, Marjorie and Thomas Melville, George Mische, and Mary Moylan—

kneeling in prayer, they have rosaries and flowers—Daniel Berrigan is weeping openly—”

The camera remained fixed on Bobby. His face in the afternoon sunlight was happier than Eunice had ever seen since the day of his ordination, but there was something more—

He was speaking, but the microphones couldn't seem to pick up all of what he was saying. “—left with no choice. To be co-opted by the machinery of death and destruction, of evil, or to stand before God and honor my commitment to His precepts. As a great man once said, ask not what your country can do for you. And as an equally great woman once said: no quarter given, no compromise, and *no prisoners*.”

He was *wet*, Eunice realized; he was dripping wet, drenched, as if he had taken a bath with all his clothes on. But she didn't get it, couldn't believe, until he struck the match.

The image on the television froze, but the sound continued. Connie Chung was saying something, but it was barely audible over the screams of the crowd. It cut off suddenly and Walter Cronkite's face was staring at her again.

And then there must have been some kind of terrible technical error at the network, because the sound and image from the Catonsville parking lot came back, and this time the image wasn't frozen. It lasted only five seconds before being cut off again, but it was enough.

Cronkite looked shaken. He was apologizing for the error that had just occurred with the further running of the footage, but Eunice wasn't listening. She stood up and moved away from the television set, still seeing it. The Golden Kennedy, engulfed in golden flames, by his own hand. She wasn't sure she would ever be able to see anything else.

For nothing, she thought. Nixon was going to be President, for nothing. The war would escalate, for nothing. The hysteria in the streets would escalate, for nothing. The Catonsville Eight would go to jail, for nothing. She would demand a spot on the Democratic ticket and either get it, or not get it, for nothing. The precepts of God would be honored, and they would be broken, for nothing.

Go to Church, she thought. Go to Church where all the answers are simple: you just burn Bobby. For nothing. For nothing. And for nothing. No prisoners.

In the back of her mind, she knew that in a week, or two weeks, or a month, she would pull herself together sufficiently to begin thinking about what she could do (for nothing—stop it! For Bobby.). Agnew would probably think he was home free after the swearing-in (for nothing—stop it!), but wouldn't it be something, wouldn't it just be devastating if something were to come out *after* the election...something unsavory, some-

thing that smelled like corruption (for nothing—stop it!), and all done perfectly legally if covertly...after all, who could hide from the IRS? Nobody (for nothing—stop it!).

Ethel was sobbing now, but that was far away from her, like everything else in the world, except for the golden flames. The Berrigans would rot in jail, she decided. Their support would wither away. Whether they were right, whether Bobby was right, she would see that they paid, along with Nixon and Agnew, and Rose and Joe. And herself.

We'll all go together when we go, she told Bobby silently. I hate you. I love you. No prisoners, no prisoners at all.

▼

i n t r o d u c t i o n t o
HOME BY THE SEA

This is my love letter to Holland. Really.

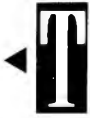
In 1990, I decided I wanted to go to the Hague for the annual world science fiction convention. It would be only the second time I had ever been off the North American continent and the first time I had ever visited a country whose primary language was not English. Previously, Holland had not been on my destination wish-list; now I can only hope I live long enough to get back there for an extended visit.

*One hazy morning I found myself looking at an ocean without a horizon line from an outdoor cafe in Scheveningen (spelling it is easy; saying it is impossible). Every evening, there was a fireworks display from one of the countries participating in an international contest being held that same weekend. All in all it was an extraordinary trip, far removed from my normal life, and it was still fresh in my mind when Ellen Datlow asked me for a story for *A Whisper of Blood*.*

When is the act of giving in truth an act of taking?

▼

Home BY The SEA



There was no horizon line out on the water.

“Limbo ocean. Man, did we hate this when I was a commercial fisherman,” said a man sitting at the table to my left. “Worse than fog. You never knew where you were.”

I sneaked a look at him and his companions. The genial voice came from a face you’d have expected to find on a wanted poster of a Middle Eastern terrorist, but the intonations were vaguely Germanic. The three American women with him were all of a type, possibly related. A very normal-looking group, with no unusual piercings or marks. I wondered how long they’d been in Scheveningen.

I slumped down in my chair, closed my eyes, and lifted my face to where I thought the sun should be. It was so overcast, there wasn’t even a hot spot in the sky. Nonetheless, the promenade was crowded, people wandering up and down aimlessly, perhaps pretending, as I was, that they were on vacation. It was equally crowded at night, when everyone came to watch the stars go out.

Of course we’re on vacation, a woman had said last night at another of the strange parties that kept congealing in ruined hotel lobbies and galleries. This had been in one of the fancier places, ceilings in the stratosphere and lots of great, big ornate windows so we could look out any time and see the stars die. *It’s an enforced vacation. Actually, it’s the world that’s gone on vacation.*

No, that’s not it, someone else had said in an impeccable British accent. It always surprised me to hear one, though I don’t know why; England

wasn't that far away. *What it is, is, the universe has quit its job.*

Best description yet, I'd decided. *The universe has quit its job.*

"Hey, Jess." I heard Jim plop down in the chair next to me. "Look what I found."

I opened my eyes. He was holding a fan of glossy postcards like a winning poker hand. Scheveningen and the Hague as they had been. I took them from him, looked carefully at each one. If you didn't know any better, you'd have thought it had been a happy world, just from looking at these.

"Where'd you find them?"

"Up a ways," he said, gesturing vaguely over his shoulder. He went *up a ways* a lot now, scavenging bits of this and that, bringing them to me as if they were small, priceless treasures. Perhaps they were—souvenirs of a lost civilization. Being of the why-bother school now, myself, I preferred to vegetate in a chair. "Kid with a whole pile of them. I traded him that can of beer I found." He stroked his beard with splayed fingers. "Maybe he can trade it for something useful. And if he can't, maybe he can fill a water-pistol with it."

What would be useful, now that the universe had quit its job? I thought of making a list on the back of one of the postcards. Clothing. Shelter. Something to keep you occupied while you waited for the last star to go out—a jig-saw puzzle, perhaps. But Jim never showed up with one of those, and I wasn't ambitious enough to go looking myself.

My old hard-driving career persona would have viewed that with some irony. But now I could finally appreciate that being so driven could not have changed anything. Ultimately, you pounded your fist against the universe and then found you hadn't made so much as a dent, let alone reshaped it. Oddly enough, that knowledge gave me peace.

Peace seemed to have settled all around me. Holland, or at least this part of Holland, was quiet. All radio and TV communications seemed to be permanently disrupted—the rest of the world might have been burning, for all we knew, and we'd just happened to end up in a trouble-free zone. Sheerly by accident, thanks to a special our travel agency had been running at the time. We joked about it: *How did you happen to come to Holland? Oh, we had a coupon.*

A kid walked by with a boombox blaring an all-too-familiar song about the end of the world as we know it and feeling fine. The reaction from the people sitting at the tables was spontaneous and unanimous. The began throwing things at him, fragments of bricks, cups, cans, plastic bottles, whatever was handy, yelling in a multitude of languages for him to beat it.

The kid laughed loudly, yelled an obscenity in Dutch, and ran away up the promenade, clutching his boombox to his front. Mission accomplished, the tourists had been cheesed off again. The man at the next table had half-

risen out of his chair and now sat down again, grinning sheepishly. "All I was gonna do was ask him where he found batteries that work. I'd really like to listen to my CD player." He caught my eye and shrugged. "It's not like I could hurt him, right?"

Jim was paying no attention. He had his left hand on the table, palm up, studiously drawing the edge of one off the postcards across the pad below his thumb, making deep, slanted cuts.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," I said.

"Fascinating. Really fascinating." He traced each cut with a finger. "No pain, no pain at all. No blood and no pain. I just can't get over that."

I looked toward the horizonless ocean. From where I was sitting, I had a clear view of the tower on the circular pier several hundred feet from the beach, and of the woman who had hanged herself from the railing near the top. Her nude body rotated in a leisurely way, testifying to the planet's own continuing rotation. As I watched, she raised one arm and waved to someone on the shore.

"Well," I said, "what did you expect at the end of the world?"

"You really shouldn't deface yourself," I said as we strolled back to the hotel where we were squatting. If you could really call it a hotel—there was no charge to stay there, no service, and no amenities. "I know it doesn't hurt, but it doesn't heal, either. Now you've got permanent hash marks and besides not being terribly attractive, they'll probably catch on everything."

Jim sighed. "I know. I get bored."

"Right." I laughed. "For the last twenty years, you've been telling me I should learn how to stop and smell the roses and now *you're* the one who's complaining about having nothing to do."

"After you've smelled a rose for long enough, it loses its scent. Then you have to find a different flower."

"Well, self-mutilation *is* different, I'll give you that." We passed a young guy dressed in leather with an irregular-shaped fragment of mirror embedded in his forehead. "Though maybe not as different as it used to be, since it seems to be catching on. What do you suppose *he's* smelling?"

Jim didn't answer. We reached the circular drive that deadended the street in front of our hotel, which had gone from motorcycle parking lot to motorcycle graveyard. On impulse, I took Jim's cut hand in my own as we crossed the drive. "I suppose it's the nature of the end of time or whatever this is, and the world never was a terribly orderly place. But nothing makes sense any more. Why do we still have day and night? Why does the earth keep turning?"

"Winding down," Jim said absently. "No reason why the whole thing should go at once." He stopped short in the middle of the sidewalk in front

of the hotel. "Listen."

There was a distant metallic crashing noise, heavy wheels on rails. "Just the trams running again. That's something else—why does the power work in some places and not in others?"

"What?" Jim blinked at me, then glanced in the general direction of the tramyard. "Oh, that. Not what I meant. Something I've been wondering lately—" there was a clatter as a tram went by on the cross street "—why we never got married."

Speaking of things that didn't seem important any more—it wasn't the first time the subject had come up. We'd talked about it on and off through the years, but after eighteen years together, the matter had lost any urgency it might have had, if it had ever had any. Now, under a blank sky in front of a luxury hotel where the guests had become squatters, it seemed to be the least of the shadow-things my life had been full of, like status and career and material comforts. I could have been a primitive tribeswoman hoarding shiny stones for all the real difference those things had ever made. They'd given me nothing beyond some momentary delight; if anything, they'd actually taken more from me, in terms of the effort I'd had to put into acquiring them, caring for them, keeping them tidy and intact. Especially the status and the career. And they sure hadn't stopped the world from ending, no more than our being married would have.

But I was so certain of what Jim wanted to hear that I could practically feel the words arranging themselves in the air between us, just waiting for me to provide the voice. *Well, dear, let's just hunt up a cleric and get married right now.* Add sound and stir till thickened. Then—

Then what? It wasn't like we actually had a future any more, together or singly. The ocean didn't even have a horizon.

"I think we *are* married," I said. "I think any two people seeing the world to its conclusion together are married in a way that didn't exist until now."

It should have been the right thing to say. Instead, I sounded like a politician explaining how a tax increase wasn't really a tax increase at all. After two decades, I could do better than some saccharine weasel words, end of the world or no.

Say it, then. The other thing, what he's waiting for. What difference does it make? The question I had to answer first, maybe the question Jim was really asking.

The edges of the cuts he'd made in his hand moved against my skin. They felt like the gills of an underwater creature out of its element, seeking to be put back in.

No pain at all. No blood and no pain.

It's not like I could hurt him, right?

Right. It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel nothing. So we

can go ahead now, do all those things that used to be so dangerous. Self-mutilation, bonding rituals, any old hazard at all.

Jim's eyes were like glass.

"Better get into the lobby now if you want to see it."

It was the Ghost of Lifetimes Past; that was what Jim and I had been calling her. She stood a respectful distance from us, a painfully thin blonde woman in a dirty white tutu and pink satin ballet shoes. The most jarring thing about her was not her silly outfit, or the way she kept popping up anywhere and everywhere, but that face—she had the deep creases of someone who had lived seventy very difficult years. Around the edge of her chin and jawbone, the skin had a peculiar strained look, as if it were being tightened and stretched somehow.

"The crucifixion," she said, and gave a small, lilting giggle. "They're probably going to take him down soon, so if you want a look, you'd better hurry." Her gaze drifted past us and she moved off, as if she'd heard someone calling her.

"You in the mood for a crucifixion?" I said lightly. It was a relief to have anything as a distraction.

"Not if we can possibly avoid it."

But there was no way we could. Pushing our way through the small crowd in the lobby, we couldn't help seeing it. I vaguely recognized the man nailed directly to the wall—one of the erstwhile millionaires from the suites on the top floor. He was naked except for a wide silk scarf around his hips and a studded collar or belt cinched wrong side out around his head in lieu of a crown of thorns. No blood, of course, but he was doing his best to look as if he were in pain.

"God," I whispered to Jim, "I hope it's not a trend."

He blew out a short, disgusted breath. "I'm going upstairs." Somehow, I had the feeling that it wasn't really the crucifixion he was so disgusted with. I meant to follow him but suddenly I felt as nailed in place as the would-be Christ. Not that I had any real desire to stand there and stare at this freak-show, but it held me all the same. All that Catholic schooling in my youth, I thought, finally catching up with me after all these years, activating a dormant taste for human sacrifice.

Ersatz-Christ looked around, gritting his teeth. "You're supposed to mock me," he said, the matter-of-fact tone more shocking than the spikes in his forearms. "It won't work unless you mock me."

"You're a day late and a few quarts low," someone in the crowd said. "It won't work unless you shed blood, either."

The crucified man winced. "Shit."

There was a roar of laughter.

"For some reason, that never occurs to them. About the blood."

I looked up at the man who had spoken. He smiled down at me, his angular face cheerfully apologetic. I couldn't remember having seen him around before.

"This is the third one I've seen," he said, jerking his head at the man on the wall. The straight black hair fell briefly over one eye and he tossed it back. "A grand gesture that ultimately means nothing. Don't you find it rather annoying, people who suddenly make those grand risky gestures only after there isn't a hope in hell of it mattering? Banning the aerosol can after there's already a hole in the ozone layer, seeking alternate sources of power after nuclear reactors have already gone into operation. It's humanity's fatal flaw—locking the barn after the horse has fled. The only creature in the universe who displays such behavior."

I couldn't place his accent or, for that matter, determine if he actually had an accent—I was getting tone-deaf in that respect. He didn't look American, but that meant nothing. All the Americans were getting a European cast as they adopted the local face.

"The universe?" I said. "You must be exceptionally well-traveled."

He laughed heartily, annoying ersatz-Christ and what sympathizers he had left. We moved out of the group, toward the unoccupied front desk. "The universe we know of, then. Which, for all intents and purposes might as well be all the universe there is."

I shrugged. "There's something wrong with that statement, but I'm no longer compulsive enough to pick out what it is. But it might be comforting to know that if there is a more intelligent species somewhere, its foibles are greater than ours, too."

"Comforting?" He laughed again. "It would seem that in the absence of pain, no comfort is necessary." He paused, as if waiting for me to challenge him on that, and then stuck out his hand. "I'm Sandor."

"Jess." The warmth of his unmarked, uncut hand was a mild shock. Fluctuations in body temperatures were as non-existent as blood in these non-times. Which would only stand to reason, since blood-flow governed skin temperature. Everyone was the same temperature now, but whether that was something feverish or as cold as a tomb was impossible to tell with no variation. Perhaps I just hadn't been touching the right people.

"Odd, isn't it," he said, politely disengaging his hand from mine. I felt a rush of embarrassment. "They wanted to investigate it at the hospital, but I wouldn't let them. Do you know, at the hospital, people are offering themselves for exploratory surgery and vivisection? And the doctors who have a stomach for such things take them willingly. Yes. They cut them open, these people, and explore their insides. Sometimes they remove internal organs and sew the people up again to see how they manage without them. They manage fine. And there is no blood, no blood anywhere, just a

peculiar watery substance that pools in the body cavity.

"And hidden away in the hospital, there is a doctor who has removed a woman's head. Her body is inactive, of course, but it does not rot. The head functions, though without air to blow through the vocal cords, it's silent. It watches him, they say, and he talks to it. They say he is trying to get the head to communicate with him in tongue-clicks, but it won't cooperate. *She* won't cooperate, if you prefer. And then there's the children's ward and the nursery where they keep the babies. These babies—"

"*Stop* it," I said.

He looked dazed, as if I'd slapped him.

"Are you insane?"

Now he gave me a wary smile. "Does sanity even come into it?"

"I mean...well, we just met."

"Ah, how thoughtless of me."

I started to turn away.

That strangely warm hand was on my arm. "I do mean it. It *was* thoughtless, pouring all that out on someone I don't know. And a stranger here as well. It must be hard for you, all this and so far from home."

"Oh, I don't know." I glanced at the crucified man. "It's all so weird, I think maybe I'd just as soon not see it happen anyplace familiar. I don't really like to think about what it must be like back home." I jerked my thumb at the man nailed to the wall. "Like, I'd rather that be some total stranger than one of my neighbors."

"Yes, I can see that. Though it must be a little easier to be with someone you're close to, as well." He looked down for a moment. "I saw you come in with your companion."

I gave him points for perception—most people assumed Jim was my husband. "Are you from here?" I asked.

"No. As I'm sure you could tell."

"Not really. Is Sandor a Polish name?"

He shrugged. "Could be. But I'm not from there, either."

There was a minor commotion as the police came in, or rather, some people dressed in police uniforms. Scheveningen was maintaining a loose local government—God knew why, force of habit, perhaps—with a volunteer uniformed cadre that seemed to work primarily as moderators or referees, mostly for the foreigners. They pushed easily through the thinning crowd and started to remove the crucified man from the wall, ignoring his protests that he wasn't finished, or it wasn't finished, or something.

"*Ite missa est*," I said, watching. "Go, the Mass is over. Or something like that."

"You remember the Latin rite. I'm impressed."

"Some things hang on." I winced at the sound of ersatz Christ's forearm

breaking. "That sounded awful, even if it didn't hurt."

"It won't heal, either. Just goes on looking terrible. Inconvenient, too. At the hospital, they have—" he stopped. "Sorry. As you said, some things hang on."

"What do you suppose they'll do with him?" I asked as they took him out. "It's not like it's worth putting him in jail or anything."

"The hospital. It's where they take all the mutilation cases bad enough that they can't move around on their own. If they want mutilation, they can have plenty there, under better conditions, for better reasons, where no one has to see them."

Finally, I understood. "Did you work there long?"

"Volunteered," he said, after a moment of hesitation. "There are no employees any more, just volunteers. A way to keep busy. I left—" he shrugged. "Sitting ducks."

"Pardon?"

"That's the expression in English, isn't it? For people who leave themselves open to harm? In this case, literally open."

"If it doesn't hurt and it doesn't kill them, and this is the end of it all as we know it," I said slowly, "how can they be leaving themselves open to harm?"

"A matter of differing cultural perspectives." He smiled. I smiled back. "You never told me what culture you were from."

"I think you could say that we're all from here now. Or might as well be. There's an old saying that you are from the place where you die, not where you were born."

"I've never heard that one. And nobody's dying at the moment."

"But nothing happens. No matter what happens, nothing happens. Isn't that a description of a dying world? But perhaps you don't see it that way. And if you don't, then perhaps you aren't dying yet. Do you think if you cut yourself, you might bleed? Is it that belief that keeps *you* from mutilating yourself, or someone else? Do you even wonder about that?"

I looked from side to side. "I feel like I'm under siege here."

He laughed. "But *don't* you wonder? Why there aren't people running through the streets in an orgy of destruction, smashing windows and cars and each other? And themselves."

"Offhand, I'd say there just doesn't seem to be much point to it." I took a step back from him.

"Exactly. No point. No reward, no punishment, no pleasure, no pain. The family of humanity has stopped bickering, world peace at last. Do you think if humans had known what it would take to bring about world peace, that they'd have worked a lot harder for it?"

"Do you really think it's like this everywhere in the world?" I said,

casually moving back another step.

"Don't you?" He spread his hands. "Can't you feel it?"

"Actually, I don't feel much." I shrugged. "Excuse me, I'm going to go catch up on my reading."

"Wait." He grabbed my arm and I jumped. "I'm sorry," he said, letting go almost immediately. "I suppose I'm wrong about there being no pleasure and no pain. I'd forgotten about the pleasure of being able to talk to someone. Of sharing thoughts, if you'll pardon the expression."

I smiled. "Yeah. See you around." I shook his hand again, more to confirm what I'd felt when he'd grabbed my arm than out of courtesy, and found I'd been right. His skin definitely felt cooler. Maybe *he* was the one who wasn't dying and I had sucked whatever real life he had out of him.

Only the weird survive, I thought, and went upstairs.

No matter what happens, nothing happens. Jim was curled up on the bed, motionless. The silence in the room was deafening. Sleep cancelled the breathing habit, if 'sleep' it actually was. There were no dreams, nothing much like rest—more like being a machine that had been switched off. Another end-of-the-world absurdity.

At least I hadn't walked in to find him slicing himself up with a razor, I thought, going over to the pile of books on the nightstand. Whatever had possessed me to think that I would wait out the end of the world by catching up with my reading had drained away with my ambition. If I touched any of the books now, it was just to shift them around. Sometimes, when I looked at the covers, the words on them didn't always make sense right away, as if my ability to read was doing a slow fade along with everything else.

I didn't touch the books now as I stretched out on the bed next to Jim. He still didn't move. On the day—if 'day' is the word for it—the world had ended, we'd been in this room, in this bed, lying side-by-side the way we were now. I am certain that we both came awake at the same moment, or came to might be a better way to put it. Went from unconscious to conscious was the way it felt, because I didn't wake up the way I usually did, slowly, groggily, and wanting nothing more than to roll over and go back to sleep for several more hours. I never woke up well, as if my body had always been fighting the busy life my mind had imposed on it. But that 'day,' I was abruptly awake without transition, staring at the ceiling, and deep down I just *knew*.

There was no surprise in me, no regret, and no resistance. It was that certainty: *time's up*. More than something I knew, it was something I *was*. Over, finished, done, used up...but not quite gone, as a bottle is not gone though emptied of its contents. I thought of Jim Morrison singing "The End," and felt some slight amusement that in the real end, it hadn't been

anywhere near so dramatic. Just...*time's up*.

And when I'd finally said, "Jim...?", he'd answered, "Uhhuh. I've got it, too." And so had everyone else.

I raised up on one elbow and looked at him without thinking anything. After awhile, still not thinking anything, I pulled at his shirt and rolled him over.

Sex at the end of the world was as pointless as anything else, or as impossible as bleeding, depending on your point of view, I guess. The bodies didn't function; the minds didn't care. I felt some mild regret about that, and about the fact that all I *could* feel was mild regret.

But it was still possible to show affection—or to engage in pointless foreplay—and take a certain comfort in the contact. We hadn't been much for that in this no-time winding-down.

Maybe passion had only been some long, pleasant dream that had ended with everything else. I slipped my hand under Jim's shirt.

His unmoving chest was cadaver-cold.

That's it, I thought, *now we're dying for real*. There was a fearful relief in the idea that I wouldn't have to worry about him mutilating himself any further.

Jim's eyes snapped open and he stared down at my hand still splayed on his stomach, as if it were some kind of alien, deformed starfish that had crawled out of the woodwork onto his torso.

"You're warm," he said, frowning.

And like that, I was lost in the memory of what it was to feel passion for another human being. What it was to *want*, emotions becoming physical reactions, flesh waking from calm to a level of response where the edge between pleasure and pain thinned to the wisp of a nerve ending.

I rolled off the bed and went into the bathroom. Behind me, I heard Jim rolling over again. Evidently he didn't want to know about my sudden change in temperature if I didn't want to tell him. A disposable razor sat abandoned on the counter near the sink. If I took it and ran my fingertip along the blade, would I see the blood well up in a bright, uneven bead? I didn't want to know, either.

The exploding star was a fiery blue-white flower against the black sky. Its light fell on the upturned faces of the crowd on the promenade, turning them milky for a few moments before it faded.

"Better than fireworks," I heard someone say.

"Ridiculous," said someone else. "Some kind of trick. The stars are thousands and millions of light-years away from us. If we see them exploding now, it means the universe actually ended millions of years ago and we're just now catching up with it."

"Then no wonder we never made any contact with life on other planets," said the first voice. "Doesn't *that* make sense? If the universe has been unraveling for the last million years, all extraterrestrial life was gone by the time we got the technology to search for it."

I looked around to see who was speaking and saw her immediately. The Ghost of Lifetimes Past was standing just outside the group, alone as usual, watching the people instead of the stars. She caught my eye before I could look away and put her fingertips to her mouth in a coy way, as if to stifle a discreet giggle. Then she turned and went up the promenade, tutu flouncing a little, as an orange starburst blossomed in the west.

If Jim had come out with me, I thought, weaving my way through the crowd, I probably wouldn't have been doing something as stupid as following this obviously loony woman. But he had remained on the bed, unmoving, long after it had gotten dark, and I hadn't disturbed him again. I had sat near the window with a book in my lap and told myself I was reading, not just staring until I got tired of seeing the same arrangement of words and turning a page, while I felt myself fade. It had been a very distinct sensation, what I might have felt if I had been awake when the world had ended.

The Ghost of Lifetimes Past didn't look back once but I was sure she knew I was following her, just as I knew she had meant for me to follow her, all the way to the Kurhaus. Even from a distance, I could see that the lights were on. Another party; what was it about the end of the world that seemed to cry out for parties? Perhaps it was some kind of misplaced huddling instinct.

I passed a man sitting on a broken brick wall, boredly hammering four-inch nails into his chest. If we hung notes on them, I thought, and sent him strolling up and down the promenade, we could have a sort of postal service-cum-newspaper. Hear ye, hear ye, the world is still dead. Or un-dead. Non-dead.

Universe still unemployed after quitting old job. Or was it, really?

The Ghost flounced across the rear courtyard of the Kurhaus without pausing, her ballet shoes going scritch-scratch on the pavement. Light spilled out from the tall windows, making giant, elongated lozenges of brightness on the stone. One level up, I could see people peering out the galleria windows at the sky. When the sun went, I thought suddenly, would we all finally go with it, or would it just leave us to watch cosmic fireworks in endless night?

They made me think of birds on a nature preserve, the people wandering around in the lobby. Birds in their best plumage and their best wounds. A young, black-haired guy in a pricey designer gown moved across the scuffed

dusty floor several yards a head of me, the two chandelier crystals stuck into his forehead above the eyebrows, catching the light. Diaphanous scarves fluttered from holes in his shoulder-blades. Trick or treat, I thought. Or maybe it was All Souls' Day, every day.

At the bar island, someone had used the bottles on the surrounding shelves for target practice and the broken glass still lay everywhere like a scattering of jewels. I saw a woman idly pick up a shard lying on the bar and take a bite out of it, as if it were a potato chip. A man in white tie and tails was stretched out on the floor on his stomach, looking around and making notes on a stenographer's pad. I wandered over to see what he was writing, but it was all unreadable symbols, part shorthand, part hieroglyphics.

There was a clatter behind me. Some people were righting one of the overturned cocktail tables and pulling up what undamaged chairs they could find. It was the group that had been sitting near me on the promenade that day, the man and his three women companions, all of them chattering away to each other as if nothing was out of the ordinary. They were still unmarked and seemed oblivious to the freak show going on around them—I half expected the man to go to the bar and try to order. Or maybe someone would sweep up some broken glass and bring it to them on a tray.

Happy Hour is here, complimentary hors d'oeuvres.

The Ghost reappeared on the other side of the bar. She looked worse, if that was possible, as if walking through the place had depleted her. A tall man on her left was speaking to her as he ran a finger along the wasted line of her chin while a man on her right was displaying the filigree of cuts he'd made all over his stomach, pulling the skin out and displaying it like a lace bib. The skin was losing its elasticity; it sagged over the waistband of his white satin pajama pants. The layer of muscle underneath showed through in dark brown.

I turned back to the group I'd seen on the promenade, still in their invisible bubble of normalcy. The man caught sight of me and smiled a greeting without a pause in what he was saying. Maybe I was supposed to choose, I thought suddenly; join the freaks or join the normalcy. And yet I had the feeling that if I chose the latter, I'd get wedged in among them somehow and never get back to Jim.

They were all staring at me questioningly now and something in those mild gazes made me think I was being measured. One of the women leaned into the group and said something; it was the signal for their intangible boundary to go back up again. Either I'd kept them waiting too long, or they didn't like what they saw, but the rejection was as obvious as if there had been a sign over their heads.

I started for the side door, intending to get out as fast as I could, and stopped short. The boy standing near the entrance to the casino might have

been the same one who'd had the boombox, or not—it was hard to tell, there were so many good-looking blond boys here—but the man he was talking to was unmistakably Jim. He hadn't bothered to change his rumpled clothes or even to comb his hair, which was still flat on one side from the way he'd been lying on the bed.

Jim was doing most of the talking. The kid's expression was all studied diffidence, but he was listening carefully all the same. Jim showed him his hand and the kid took it, touching the cuts and nodding. After a few moments, he put his arm around Jim's shoulders and, still holding his hand, led him around the front of the closed, silent elevator doors to the stairs. I watched them go up together.

"Do you wonder what that was all about?"

I didn't turn around to look at him. "Well. Sandor Whoever from Wherever. The man who can still raise the mercury on a thermometer while the rest of us have settled at room temperature. If you start talking about interesting things people are doing in the hospital, I might take a swing at you."

He chuckled. "That's the spirit. Next question: do you wonder how they get the power on in some places when it won't work in others?"

"In a way."

"Do you want to find out?"

I nodded.

He didn't touch me even in a casual way until we reached his room on the fourth floor. It was the first time I'd ever been higher than the galleria level. The lights in the hallway shone dimly, glowing with what little power was left from whatever was keeping the lobby lit up, and his hand was like fire as he pulled me out of the hallway and into the room.

His body was a layer of softness over hard muscle. I tore his clothing to get at it; he didn't mind. Bursts of light from the outside gave me fleeting snapshots of his face. No matter what I did, he had the same expression of calm acceptance. Perhaps out of habit, covering the secret of his warmth—if the rest of us pod creatures knew he was the last (?) living thing on earth, what might we not do for this feeling of life he could arouse?

Already, his flesh wasn't as warm as it had been. That was me, I thought, pushing him down on the bed. I was taking it from him and I couldn't help it. Or perhaps it was just something inherent in the nature of being alive, that it would migrate to anyplace it was not.

Even so, even as he went from hot to cool, he lost nothing. Receptive, responsive, accommodating—in the silent lightning of dying stars, calm and accepting, but not passive. I was leading in this *pas de deux*, but he seemed to know how and where almost before I did, and was ready for it.

And now I could feel *how* it was happening, the way the life in his body was leached away into my own un-alive flesh. I was taking it from him. The act of *taking* is a distinctive one; no one who had ever taken anything had taken it quite like I took Sandor.

He gave himself up without resistance, and yet *give up* was not what he was doing, unless it was possible to surrender aggressively. It was as if I wanted him because his purpose was to be wanted, and he had been waiting for me, for someone to provide the wanting, to want him to death. Ersatz-Christ in the lobby had had it wrong, it never could have worked. Humans didn't sacrifice themselves, they were sacrificed to; they didn't give, they were alive only in the act of taking—

Somehow, even with my head on fire, I pulled away from him. He flowed with the movement like a storm-tide. I fought the tangle of sheets and cold flesh against warm, and the violence felt almost as good as the sex. If I couldn't fuck him to death, I'd settle for beating his head in, I thought dimly. We rolled off the bed onto the carpet and I scrambled away to the bathroom and slammed the door.

"Is there something wrong?" The puzzlement in his voice was so sincere I wanted to vomit.

"*Stop it.*"

"Stop what?"

"Why did you let me do that to you?"

He might have laughed. "Did *you* do something to me?"

A weak pain fluttered through my belly. There was wetness on my thighs.

"Turn on the light," he said. "You can now, you know. It'll work for you, now that you're living."

I flipped the switch. The sudden brightness was blinding. Turning away from the lights over the sink, I saw myself in the full-length mirror on the door. The wetness on my thighs was blood.

My blood? Or his?

The pain in my belly came again.

"Jess?"

"Get away. Let me get dressed and get out of here. I don't want this."

"Let me in."

"No. If you come near me, I'll take more from you."

Now he did laugh. "What is it you think *you* took?"

"Life. Whatever's left. You're alive and I'm one of the fading ones. I'll make you fade, too."

"That's an interesting theory. Is that what you think happened?"

"Somehow you're still really alive. Like the earth still turns, like there are still stars. Figures we wouldn't all fade away at once, us people. Some

of us would still be alive. Maybe as long as there are still stars, there'll still be some people alive." The sound of my laughter in the small room was harsh and ugly. "So romantic. As long as there are stars in the sky, that's how long you'll be here for me. Go away. I don't want to hurt you."

"And what *will* you do?" he asked. "Go back to your bloodless room and your bloodless man, resume your bloodless wait to see what the end will be? It's all nothing without the risk, isn't it? When there's nothing to lose, there's really nothing at all. Isn't that right?"

The lock snapped and the door swung open. He stood there holding onto either side of the doorway. The stark hunger in the angular features had made his face into a predator's mask, intent, voracious, without mercy. I backed up a step, but there was nowhere to go.

He lunged at me and caught me under the arms, lifting me to eye level. "You silly cow," he whispered, and his breath smelled like meat. "I didn't get cooler, *you* just got *warmer*."

He shoved me away. I hit the wall and slid down. The pain in my shoulders and back was exquisite, not really pain but pure sensation, the un-alive, un-dead nerve endings frenzied with it. I wanted him to do it again, I wanted him to hit me, or caress me, or cut me, or do anything that would make me *feel*. Pain or pleasure, whatever there was, I wanted to live through it, get lost in it, die of it, and, if I had to die of it, take him with me.

He stood over me with the barest of smiles. "Starting to understand now?"

I pushed myself up, my hands slipping and sticking on the tiled wall.

"Yeah." He nodded. "I think maybe you are. I think you're definitely starting to get it." He backed to the sink and slid a razor blade off the counter. "How about this?" He held the blade between two fingers, moving it back and forth so it caught the light. "Always good for a thrill. Your bloodless man understands that well enough already. Like so many others. Where do you think he goes when he takes his little walks up the promenade, what do you think he does when he leaves you to sit watching the hanging woman twist and turn on the end of her rope?" He laughed and popped the blade into his mouth, closing his eyes with ecstasy. Then he bared his teeth; the blood ran over his lower lip onto his chin and dripped down onto his chest.

"Come on," he said, the razor blade showing between his teeth. "Come *kiss* me."

I wasn't sure that I leaped at him as much as the life in him pulled me by that hunger for sensation. He caught me easily, holding me away for a few teasing seconds before letting our bodies collide.

The feeling was an explosion that rushed outward from me, and as it did, I finally did understand, mostly that I hadn't had it right at all, but it was too late to do anything about it. The only mercy he showed was to let the light

go out again.

Or maybe that wasn't mercy. Maybe that was only what happened when he drained it all out of me and back into himself, every bit of pain and pleasure and being alive.

He kept the razor blade between his teeth for the whole time. It went everywhere, but he never did kiss me.

The room was so quiet, I thought he'd left. I got up from where I'd been lying, half-in and half-out of the bathroom, thinking I'd find my clothes and go away now, wondering how long I'd be able to hide the damage from Jim—if damage it was, since I no longer felt anything—wondering if I would end up in the hospital, if there was already a bed with my name on it, or whether I'd be just another exotic for nightly sessions at the Kurhaus.

"Just one more thing," he said quietly. I froze in the act of taking a step toward the bed. He was standing by the open window, looking out at the street.

"What's the matter?" I said. "Aren't I dead enough yet?" He laughed, and now it was a soft, almost compassionate sound, the predator pitying the prey. "I just want to show you something."

"No."

He dragged me to the window and forced my head out. "See it anyway, this one time. A favor, because I'm so well pleased." He pulled my head back to make me look up at the sky. A night sky, very flat, very black, featureless, without a cloud and with no stars, none at all.

"A magic lantern show, yes," he said, as though I'd spoken. "*We* put the signs and wonders in the sky for you. So you wouldn't see *this*."

He forced my head down, digging his fingers more deeply into my hair. Below, in the courtyard, people wandered among a random arrangement of cylindrical things without seeing them. They were pale things, silent, unmoving; long, ropy extensions stretched out from the base of each one, sinking into the pavement like cables, except even in the dim light, I could see how they pulsed.

While I watched, a split appeared in the nearest one. The creature that pushed its way out to stand and stretch itself in the courtyard was naked, vaguely female-looking, but not quite human. It rubbed its hands over the surface of the cylinder, and then over itself. I pulled away.

"You see, that's the other thing about your kind besides your tendency toward too little, too late," he said conversationally as I dressed. If I tucked my shirt into my pants I could keep myself together a little better. "You miss things. You're blind. All of you. Otherwise, you'd have seen us before now. We've always been here, waiting for our time with you. If even one of you had seen us, you might have escaped us. Perhaps even destroyed us. Instead,

you all went on with your lives. And now we're going on with them." He paused, maybe waiting for me to say something. I didn't even look at him as I wrapped my shirt around the ruin of my torso. "Don't worry. What I just showed you, you'll never see again. Perhaps by the time you get home, you'll even have forgotten that you saw anything."

He turned back to the window. "See you around the promenade."

"First time's the worst."

The Ghost of Lifetimes Past fell into step beside me as I walked back along the promenade. She was definitely looking worse, wilted and eaten away. "After that," she added, "it's the natural order of things."

"I don't know you," I said.

"I know you. We all know each other, after. Go home to your husband now and he'll know you, too."

"I'm not married."

"Sure." She smiled at me, her face breaking into a mass of lines and seams. "It could be worse, you know. They like to watch it waste me, they like to watch it creep through me and eat me alive. They pour life into us, they loan it to us, you could say, and then they take it back with a great deal of interest. And fascination. They feed on us, and we feed on them but considering what they are, we're actually feeding on ourselves. And maybe a time will come that will really be the end. After all, how long can we make ourselves last?"

She veered away suddenly, disappearing down a staircase that led to one of the abandoned restaurants closer to the waterline.

As I passed the tower, the hanging woman waved a greeting. There would be no horizon line on the ocean again today.

I had thought Jim would know as soon as he saw me, but I didn't know what I expected him to do. He watched me from where he lay on the bed with his arms behind his head. Through the thin material of his shirt, I could see how he'd been split from below his collarbone down to his navel. It seems to be a favorite pattern of incision with them, or maybe they really have no imagination to speak of.

He still said nothing as I took a book from the stack on the nightstand and sat down in the chair by the window, positioning myself with my back to the room. The words on the pages looked funny, symbols for something I no longer knew anything about.

The mattress creaked as Jim got up and I heard him changing his clothes. I didn't want to look—after all, it wouldn't matter what I saw—and still not wanting to, I put the unreadable book aside and turned around.

The incision was actually very crude, as if it had been done with a jagged

shard of glass. I wanted to feel bad at the sight, I wanted to feel sorry and sad and angry at the destruction, I wanted to feel the urge to rush to him and offer comfort. But as Sandor had pointed out, in the absence of pain, no comfort was necessary.

Abruptly, Jim shrugged and finished dressing, and I realized he'd been waiting for something, maybe for me to show him my own. But I had no desire to do that yet.

"I'm going for a walk up the promenade," he said, heading for the door. "you can come if you want." He didn't look back for a response.

"Do you think," I heard myself say just before he stepped out into the hall, "they're everywhere? Or if we could just get home somehow..."

"Jess." He almost smiled. "We *are* home."

I followed him at a distance. He didn't wait for me, walking along briskly but unhurriedly, and I didn't try to catch up with him. The sky seemed darker and duller, the sounds of the people on the promenade quieter, more muffled. The trams didn't run.

I stayed out until dark. The dying-stars show was especially spectacular, and I watched it until Sandor finally got around to coming back for me.

▼

i n t r o d u c t i o n t o
LOST GIRLS

Just one more, dear, and then we'll call it a wrap.

When I was a kid, I wanted very much to fly off to Neverland with Peter Pan and have all kinds of wonderful adventures with pirates and Indians—all the exciting stuff. For some reason, it never occurred to me to picture myself in the Wendy role.

Being consigned to the Wendy role anywhere at all was not something I actually came up against until I went to high school. And even then, I didn't believe anyone was really serious about it—I thought I was being kidded. By the time I hit senior year physics and found myself the only female in the class, I understood only too well.

High school physics prepared me for science fiction in more ways than one.

And so it continues to go. I viewed the selection of Bill Clinton's Attorney General with the proverbial jaded eye—like, I'm sure each male has been asked how he managed to care for his children, right? Sure. Just like people always ask my husband how he manages to juggle fatherhood and a career. (He has a pretty supportive spouse, in case you were actually wondering.)

But we were on our way to Neverland. Weren't we?

LOST GIRLS

Well, I tried to tell him there was going to be trouble. I really did. I really thought that as the female who had been closest to him the longest, I'd have had some major influence, that he would listen. But it's the same old story—it's just about impossible to get anyone to take you seriously when you're only a few inches high and covered with fairy dust. And you're cursed with tinkling bells for a voice. After all that, the frivolous name is practically anticlimax.

Can't say I haven't contributed to my own predicament, though. For time out of mind, I've played the role of the party girl with gusto. I was, after all, the one who always got everybody high—literally. You wanted to fly, I was the girl to see, I had the stuff.

Still am. You can't help what you are, after all. But, as I maintained to Peter, you can help what you do with it.

"We're doing just fine, Tink," he said, folding his arms behind his head and watching the clouds sail by. He was picking out shapes in them—ships, castles, dragons, two-headed teddy bears, the usual for around here. The clouds always do that, float across the sky in shapes you could pick out, except on the few occasions that called for a corker of a thunderstorm. "We're doing better than ever. We're giving all those children a childhood. Childhood's getting scarcer all the time. They have to start school now when they're barely out of their prams—they don't even have prams any more, not the way we used to know them. And by the time I come to take them away on adventures, they can read and count and write, they can name the days of the week and the months of the year, and their heads are filled with the most

peculiar notions!

"For instance," he said quickly, sitting up and letting a really good cloud that looked like a giant porcupine playing a pipe organ break up un-named, "for instance, that little one that kept trying to tell me the Indians weren't Indians, they were—" he made a face. Couldn't remember, of course. Peter's memory is the size of a hazelnut, and not a very big hazelnut. But then, it has to be, he wouldn't be who and what he is if he had any kind of memory. He's the Original Lost Boy, after all, and so he's perpetually at square one, every hurt is like the first hurt, every joy like the first, and so on and so forth. But when the occasion called for it, he could summon up a little recollection, about something extraordinarily bad, or extraordinarily good, or just extraordinarily extraordinary. This would stay with him for a little while, until some other extraordinary thing came along to replace it.

"Native Americans," I said. I always remember. Being a fairy, my memory is not subject to the constraints of eternal childhood.

"Who are?" he said.

"Indians, Peter. Indians. The little boy told you that Indians should really be called Native Americans." I wasn't impatient, just bored.

"Oh. Yes. Native Americans, Indians—heavens, Tink, what are 'americans?' The Indians are the Indians, they've always been the Indians."

No use to explain to Peter about that, that the people he called Indians bore about as much resemblance to the real thing as I did. Some of them could have been Sioux or Comanche or Mohawk, but the rest of them were a mix of nationalities and ethnic groups. Peter had a child's blindness to that kind of difference between people, endearing and beautiful in one way, totally insensitive in another. 'Gay, innocent, and heartless,' remember?

Tiger Lily and I had covered that subject a few times in the course of our many late-night talks. When Peter thought I was safely shut up in my little house-within-the-house, I would fly off into the night, over the mountains and the valleys and lagoon to her teepee. She was the only other female on the island who would understand. Yes, we set aside our differences a long, long time ago, though Peter doesn't know it. As the source of the problem, he just wouldn't get it, he'd feel betrayed, even though he never understood why we were in conflict in the first place, and never will!

How's that for an obtuse male? I ask you!

"He's a child," Lil said, rolling her eyes. "The idea that there'd be something about people that had nothing to do with him or his ideas just never occurs to him. If you tried to tell him even just a little bit about what really happened to the people called Indians—why, it would be like speaking High Church Latin to him, he'd understand it about as well. He's got just enough information and misinformation in more or less equal parts to offend anyone except a very young child."

“That would have to be a very, very young child,” I reminded her.

But mostly what we discussed was what we called the Female Predicament. All sorts of children came to the island with Peter, children of every culture, every color, every faith. The only difference Peter recognized was gender.

Boy! (If you’ll pardon the expression.)

Tiger Lily and I laid most of the blame squarely on Wendy. Perhaps that’s not really fair, but she did start the whole Mother business.

I knew she was trouble the second I laid eyes on her in the nursery that night—the second Peter laid eyes on her! Forgot his shadow, right! What galls me is that I didn’t see through that one immediately. But after all, I’m a fairy—we handle things differently, it’s all magic with us. I should have known, though, I’d been around Peter long enough and even if he had lived in Never-Never Land since falling out of his pram in Kensington Gardens, he’d always be more human boy when it came right down to it.

Which suggests, naturally, that even he wasn’t really aware of what he was doing when he “forgot” his stupid shadow and then had to go back for it. But with all the signs there, I should have been able to read them, I shouldn’t have had to get locked in a damned drawer before I figured out what was going on! Was I mad when he let me out! And was she surprised when she saw me. Tried to kiss up to me right away, too, talking about how beautiful I was and acting all enchanted to see a real live fairy and all that rot. But the look in her eyes wasn’t wide, innocent wonder. Her eyes weren’t quite wide enough; in fact they were narrowed ever so slightly. It wasn’t wonder there but wariness and territoriality and jealousy.

Jealous of a fairy only a few inches high—talk about mixing information and misinformation! Right away she started trying to one-up me. Oh, I can sew, and I can do the spring cleaning, and I’ll be your mother, and blah-blah-blah. And I got sucked right into it, I can’t deny that. I got pissy about the fairy dust. Okay, shame on me. But in the end, they flew, all of them, they flew away to Never-Never Land and had all those adventures.

Okay, okay, the thing with the arrow was awful, too. But come on, this is Never-Never Land we’re talking about, I knew she couldn’t actually be killed...not killed-killed, not killed dead. It’s like a roller coaster, a great scare but nothing permanent. I wanted to scare the living daylights out of her, I wanted to scare her so bad she could fly all the way back to the nursery just by screaming.

Now I shudder to think that I could do such a thing to another female, even if it was Wendy. Do you see how crazy it made me? And in such a short period of time! Awful. Just awful! But she played it for all it was worth and then some—her great hovering-on-the-brink-of-death scene. Name me someone else who got a whole house built for herself that way. So it wasn’t

much of a house, we all continued to live in the underground place—the symbolism was enough to seal our fates. By attacking her, I had managed to cement her position.

She had second thoughts about it after awhile, when it was too late really to do anything about it. If she hadn't started the whole mother business, she'd have been treated like a lost boy with a dirty face and her own bow and arrow. She wasn't the first girl who had made it to Never-Never Land, though there hadn't been many in the past. Peter automatically gravitated to boys, though occasionally one or two of them had sisters who came along, as if caught in the backwash. Canny little things kept a low profile, did everything the boys did, obeyed Peter's orders, and didn't say much. I checked on them later, and I must say it was interesting the way things turned out for them—the little Sanger girl, for instance.

Looking at it from that angle, you would think that the first female to assert herself as a female rather than just one of the boys could have brought some significant changes to NeverNever Land and from thence to the world. But as soon as we get one, what does she do but perpetuate the same old roles? Well, it was all she knew. Being female has never saved anyone from a limited imagination. But perhaps it might have been different if she'd been a single parent, and not insisted that Peter be the father. That would have made the position of mother something altogether different, she might have come into her own as a heroic figure. But that was part of all she knew—mother and father, and from her point of view, Peter was the logical choice for father, even leaving the way she felt about him out of it. And when you consider her emotions—well, there was no one on the island to advise her that just because you love a male doesn't mean that you should have a family with him. Would she have listened if there had been?

To be fair, I don't suppose I'd have wanted to be the single mother of that bunch, either. But with Peter as the father, she might as well have been. Peter the father with the roving eye! And dumb enough to talk to Wendy about it! Gosh, Wendy, I don't know what Tiger Lily wants to be to me, but I don't think it's a mother. Woo! Did she give him hell about that! And poor Lil—she got sucked into the game just as I did. Peter and the boys had rescued her from the pirates hundreds and hundreds of times, it was part of the great tradition that makes Never-Never Land what it is. It wasn't that Peter nearly died on the rock—he always nearly died. Hook's bite, the rising tide, Peter speaking what he believes will be his last words about dying being an awfully big adventure—this is fantasy childhood drama.

She changed everything. I saw it at the celebration at the Indian camp later, the way she looked at Lil. It was the same way she had looked at me in the nursery. Lil obviously didn't know what was happening exactly, but she reacted to Wendy the way she would have to anyone hunting on Indian

land without permission, and she knew instinctively that she had to win something of Peter's heart if she ever wanted to be rescued from the pirates again.

I think that was the bitterest pill for her—up until then, winning something of Peter's heart wasn't even an issue. If Peter had even just been showing signs of growing up (impossible, of course, but just for the sake of example), she'd have let him go. But that wasn't the problem.

In my more unkind moments, I've thought that was why Wendy got herself captured by the pirates. Of course, everybody got captured by the pirates—that was part of the tradition—but this time, it wasn't just Hook and his men capturing all of Peter's men. This time, Hook had Peter's family, the children and their mother. It put a whole different spin on the rescue, especially after that little scene she played with the boys in the underground house.

Another blatant attempt to force Peter's hand is what that was, telling that story about mothers pining away for their children, reminding the boys. Not the first time she'd told the story; I knew sooner or later Peter would listen to it and it would get to him. Did she really, truly believe deep down that she would be able to pull Peter away from Never-Never Land? If so, the joke was on her—she got everyone except Peter.

And the looks on those boys' faces as they prepared to leave Never-Never Land forever—is it any wonder I tried to kill myself?

I know, everyone thinks it's my noblest moment, saving Peter from drinking Hook's poison. But I didn't have to drink it myself to do that. Every other time I always just flew into the room and knocked the glass from his hands. But that time, I was in despair. I felt Peter's loss even more deeply than he did. I loved those boys, too, after all, they were a big part of my life as well. The way she manipulated their feelings, playing them like blooming violins, for goodness sake! What a nightmare! I felt that was worse poison than what Hook put in Peter's "medicine" (another of Wendy's little innovations, as if anyone ever got sick that way here!). So I squared my shoulders, preened my wings, and said, Good-bye, cruel world.

Yes, I really would have died...sort of. As Peter has explained to countless children, real death comes for one of my kind whenever a child says I don't believe in fairies. The poison would have killed me as well, just because of the treatment Peter had decided on—leaving it to children everywhere all over the world to affirm their belief in fairies. Had I expired before Peter could help me, I would simply have been reborn in some other realm that allows the existence of fairies, without memory, without sadness. I was hoping for something Nordic. And then Peter had to interfere.

Had his treatment failed, had there been too few children clapping their hands, there would have been no rebirth for me, just nothingness. Peter felt

he had to prove something to both of us—that he still had it, of course, that he was still the most beloved boy of all time, and thus children would clap their hands just because he asked them to. Some see that as Peter's noblest moment, others see it as childhood's noblest moment. The truth is something that is probably best left unsaid in a place like Never-Never Land. You can't have a Never-Never Land without a certain amount of denial.

You know the rest of the story. Did Hook and the pirates really die? Of course not. I found Hook later, washed up on the shore of Mermaid Lagoon with his clothes in rags, cursing a blue streak (most of it sounded like Argh! Argh!) and vowing revenge, if a little confused—he thought he'd lost his hand to the crocodile just then. I kept an eye on him until Smee floated in clinging to a bit of driftwood. If it were not against the rules, I would visit Smee in the middle of the night sometimes and have a few long talks with him, too. I suspect there's a lot of common ground between us, and perhaps the time is coming when I will be able to have a word or two with him.

Everyone weeps over the last meeting between Wendy and Peter in London, myself included. Surprised? Me, too, a little. Of course, I don't just weep over that—I weep for the lost boys who have become bankers and citizens of good standing. How I miss them, Tootles and Slightly and the rest! And I weep for Wendy, too, for her realization of what she lost, which was not Peter. What she lost was much more complex than that.

And then she went and did it anyway—let her own daughter take her place to do Peter's spring cleaning! Oh, that really galled me! I'd have thought that growing up would have made her realize her mistake and instead, she visited it upon her daughter! And her daughter did the same to her daughter—Wendy's granddaughter.

Except by then, things were starting to change.

There was a whole new group of lost boys in Never-Never Land, of course, and Peter's memory didn't admit that there had ever been any others. Though occasionally he slipped and called one of them 'Tootles' and was mightily confused at his mistake, since he didn't remember Tootles. The name had just come out of nowhere as far as he was concerned. I never reminded him.

He never slipped with the girls. There would be only one Wendy and though her memory grew dim, it never vanished completely. Odd, but there's no accounting for the vagaries of a mind like Peter's.

What was even more interesting, though, was that from the time Wendy left, there was never more than one girl brought to Never-Never Land, and she was always brought to fill Wendy's old position as quasi-mother. No more did little girls slip in among the gang brought to have adventures with the pirates and the Indians and to vow that they would never grow up, at least for a little while. There was always just the one girl. Wendy's daughter went

along with it. But Wendy's granddaughter—ah, she was a different story altogether!

She wasn't completely free of the expectations that had been thrust upon her both here in Never-Never Land and back in the real world. But she questioned a lot, and if she didn't like the answers, she could be quite stubborn. One day, I found Peter and the boys making their own beds; she was off swimming in Mermaid Lagoon. Hook tried to capture her, of course, and Peter and the other boys ran to her rescue. But what do you suppose they found when they got there? Hook running as if for his life while she pelted him with stones and shells and driftwood and anything else she could find to throw! And yelling threats of worse punishment if he ever had the nerve to bother her again.

Poor Hook! He didn't know what hit him. After all, he was a pirate. When he captured her and the boys later, his pirate band was twice the size it usually was, and to this day, I have no idea where he found the extra men. Men, yes. As I said, he was a pirate.

So after they all went home to grow up, I tried to talk to Peter. Next season, I said, just round up a bunch of boys and girls and treat them all like lost boys. The whole point is to have adventures without parents, especially mothers. They'll all like that and if the spring cleaning doesn't get done and the beds don't get made, so what? This is Never-Never Land, for heaven's sake!

But would he listen? Lost boys and a mother, that was the formula, he said; he was Peter Pan, I was just the fairy with the dust. My job was to get them off the ground, he was the one who really taught them how to fly and he was the leader. Then he reminded me about saving my life the time I drank poison and believe me, I bit my tongue pretty hard to keep from telling him a few hard truths about that. But then, I'm pretty sure it's against the rules to use the words 'suicide attempt' in NeverNever Land anyway. Certain amount of denial, remember? So he went and got Wendy's great-granddaughter, and that's when the, uh, dirt really hit the fan (only Hook is allowed profanity, and he never gets worse than damn; I got away with ass just because it really is another word for donkey).

Wendy's great-granddaughter got the picture the minute her feet touched down on the island. Oooh! You never saw such a fuss! Mother?! I'll give you mother! I didn't fly straight on till morning to clean up after a bunch of boys, now bring on those pirates! Where's that Hook, I'll tear him limb from limb! Where are the Indians, I want to beat the tom-tom and go on the warpath! Where's the fairy, I want to fly some more!

Peter, of course, tried to argue with her. From the time he alighted at her window to the time they took off into the night, he never once said spring-cleaning or mother or anything like it—by then he was taking a lot for

granted. He shouldn't have been, you know that, I know that, I think even some of the longterm boys knew that. But Peter—well, that's the perennial boy for you. Things had changed back there in the world. It didn't mean there had to be any kind of major changes in Never-Never Land, except for the genders of the children involved. If he'd just been able to go with that particular flow, eventually he would never have known the difference between having adventures with just all boys and having adventures with a mixed band of boys and girls.

Perhaps that was too mature a viewpoint for the kind of boy he was. And perhaps an invisible line had been crossed when Wendy had played mother...the denial for the need of a mother had been erased, you see, and there was no going back. And poor Peter just couldn't readjust his perception of what a mother was. Mothers didn't fight pirates, they didn't go on the warpath with the Indians, they didn't have their own bows and arrows.

Ho, ho, ho. What I could have told him about that from my visits to the real world! Yes, I visited there more often after Wendy's granddaughter. I knew I had some catching up to do.

And yes, I did find Wendy on one of those visits. She was a very old woman by then. I found her in Kensington Gardens, and what do you suppose she was doing? Letting children out of their prams! Yes! And only girl-children! Oh, I know they don't call them prams any more, but you know what I mean. No one really knew what she was doing, and none of the children ever got far before their mothers caught them again. She was dotty, I decided, as I lured her to a secluded area and revealed myself.

"Hallo, Tink," she said. "Do you still hate me?"

"I never really hated you," I told her. "But you must realize now that what you did wasn't right."

She gave a sigh that shook her body alarmingly. Just a bundle of sticks now, our Wendy. I was glad Peter wasn't here. "Of course I understand," she said. "Why do you think I'm letting the little girls loose? They're entitled to a childhood full of adventures and excitement, not just training for an adulthood of nothing but limitations." She laughed sadly. "Yes, Tink, I've learned—that's part of growing up, you see, to learn some of your lessons too late! I'm trying to make amends. But it's hard. People watch their children so much more closely than they used to, I don't think a child's been lost to the fairies here in over thirty years! And there are so few of them, they're all shut up tight in daycare centers and schools! Peter is lucky to get to any of them at all, boys or girls." She paused, looking alarmed. "Does he still get to them, Tink? Or has the worst happened?"

Obviously she hadn't seen her granddaughter lately, which made me feel very sad for her indeed. I was about to tell her all about that when a police officer came along, rendering me invisible. All she found was a dotty old

woman talking to some hydrangea bushes, and she led her away, still talking. That made me feel very, very sad. Poor Wendy, a stereotype to the end. I never found her again after that, so I never got a chance to tell her what happened with her great-granddaughter.

You can see it coming, can't you? Anybody can, except Peter and some of the more obtuse boys. She rebelled completely, of course. The first night in the underground house, she crept up to my chamber, took some fairy dust, and flew out into the darkness. She was back the next morning with her own band and, needless to say, they were all girls.

They set up camp in Mermaid Lagoon and waited for the pirates to attack. Hook, who had been burned before and hadn't forgotten it, held off and had a few half-hearted skirmishes with Peter and his band instead. The girls got tired of waiting and, in a brilliant midnight raid, attacked the Jolly Roger and took it over, forcing all the pirates to walk the plank. They sailed around in it for weeks until they lost interest and went ashore. Hook and his men saved it from going aground, refitted it, and declared war.

What excitement! What action! Sometimes the girls would win, sometimes the pirates would beat them back. But even when the pirates won, they knew they'd been in a fight, I can tell you! Hook lived in mortal fear that the lost girls and the lost boys would join forces and completely overwhelm him and his men.

Do I have to tell you this never happened?

Peter and his boys had a very disappointing season; it rained every other day and they ended up hanging around the underground house bored out of their minds, so much so that some of the new boys started talking about something called videogames and television. That was when Peter had tried to tell me we were doing fine, providing childhoods for those who would otherwise have been forced to unfortunate precocity.

While on the other side of the island, the girls had made a treaty with the Indians and were whooping it up like mad. When it finally occurred to Peter that he hadn't seen Tiger Lily in many, many moons, his dismay was terrible to behold. And when he crept up to the Indian village and found Wendy's granddaughter and Tiger Lily smoking the peace pipe together and leading the dance around the fire without him, I thought he would die of heartbreak.

He could not get over that one, of course, and it was what drove him to ask her for a meeting. I carried the message to her, naturally.

"Well, well," she said to me. "So His Nibs has finally decided to parley, eh? What do you say, girls? Shall I talk with our boy Pan, or shall we attack the pirates again?"

They all voted for the pirates, but she was just being difficult. She agreed to meet him in Mermaid Lagoon.

It didn't go well. Peter swaggered up to her and said brightly, "Well,

time to go home and grow up. The boys are ready, how about you?"

She poked him in the chest with her finger. "You can keep that stuff, pal. Not all the boys go home and grow up, You don't go home and grow up. So who says we have to? Maybe some of my girls want to, and if they do, I won't stop them. But me, I like it here. I'm planning to stay a good long time, maybe forever and ever. I like showing Hook who's boss. I like dancing around the campfire with Tiger Lily and the rest of the Indians. And I like flying."

Peter gave me a dirty look. He knew I'd been supplying her as well as him. But what could I do? If you're a child in NeverNever Land, you get the dust, it's the law. The pirates could have it if they wanted it, but it won't work for them because they can't think good thoughts, and the Indians have their own way of life.

They argued and argued, but Peter couldn't get her to budge. In the end, some of the boys left, but not one of the girls. And when Peter went out to collect some more children the next season, he couldn't find one girl to be mother. They'd all gone with her.

She stayed, and stayed, and stayed, until it was obvious that she was never going to leave the island. No one knew what to call her—Pammy Pan? Patty Pan? Petra Pan? She settled on Ellspeth—heaven knows why, I don't. And for a long, long time, it was lost boys with Peter, and lost girls with Ellspeth, and never the twain would meet.

And then, of course, it happened. The morning dawned when there were both girls and boys with Ellspeth, and only boys with Peter.

"Nothing I could do, Tink," Ellspeth told me. "I'd been taking their sisters away for years, and the sisters had been telling them stories and they wanted in on the fun. Sure, I said no at first. Then I realized how unfair it was. After all, Peter's been doing just that very thing with the girls—that's how I got started in the first place. It's ridiculous to have the boys with only boys and the girls with only girls, that's not how anyone lives. Oh, the pirates are all male but they're pirates, you don't expect pirates to be enlightened." I had a feeling the pirates' day was coming, too, but they weren't my concern, they could take care of themselves. "Couldn't you just combine the bands?" I said. "Lost girls and lost boys together?"

"Only if I or one of the other girls'll be the mother," Ellspeth said grimly. "And we won't do it. We won't. If Peter can be stubborn, we can be just as stubborn."

And there it sits—Peter on one side of the island with his little band, and Ellspeth on her side with her somewhat larger band. What's really sad is that Peter's band gets smaller every year. Going with Ellspeth has so much more to offer. She gets all the good fights with the pirates and all the good parties with the Indians, and she has even usurped Peter's drowning scene on the rock.

Peter mopes around and cuts himself whittling a lot. Occasionally, a boy goes over to Ellspeth and then it rains for a week on Peter's side.

I guess what it is really is that eternal childhood is—well, not a lie, exactly, but a half-truth. At some point, perhaps the very point at which a child is ready for Never-Never Land, childhood is actually a choice more than a condition. Ellspeth chose. Peter could choose, too, but so far, he won't. I think because he's so afraid that doing such a thing will mean he's growing up, and it won't mean any such thing at all. And there's the whole difference between childhood and childish.

I shouldn't try to be an expert because I am, after all, a fairy and as I said, it's all magic with fairies, magic and no worries, unless you drink poison. And believe me, I'm not stupid enough to try that twice. Not with the way things are today!

Sometimes I wonder, though, what would happen. If my life depended on somebody's faith...whose faith would save me? Is Peter's still strong enough? Does he still believe that all those little children out there in the dark believe? After all that's happened, I like to think that's still so. I like to think that's what keeps Peter the eternal boy that he is and that someday, he'll go over to the other side of the island and hail Ellspeth as his ally and friend, forget this silly mother business once and for all. It's not like he's got anything to lose!

Then he'll really be himself again, he'll go back to being brave Peter Pan, the boy who won't grow up, instead of poor Peter, the boy that the children hardly ever fly with any more.

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A B O U T T H E A U T H O R

Pat Cadigan was born in Schenectady, NY, and grew up in Fitchburg, MA. Attending the University of Massachusetts on a scholarship, she eventually transferred to the University of Kansas where she received her degree. Cadigan was an editor and writer for Hallmark Cards in Kansas City for 10 years before embarking on her career as a fiction writer in 1987.

Since that time her Hugo and Nebula Award-nominated short stories have appeared in such magazines as *Omni*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* as well as numerous anthologies. Her first collection, *Patterns*, was honored with the Locus Award in 1990.

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